

## **Taboos of Thematization and Gate Keeping in the Social Sciences: Moderators' Comments**

*Franz Breuer, Jo Reichertz & Wolff-Michael Roth*

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**Abstract:** In this volume, we publish two new contributions to the *FQS* column "Debate" entitled "Doing Successful Research in the Social Sciences ...". The first text focuses on a theoretical issue, proposing a law of silence concerning the social background and internal processes in the subculture of the social sciences. The second text presents a literary case study of a dissertation in the thickets of university politics. The two contributions are an expression of very different perspectives onto the milieu of social science. They exemplify our, the moderators' intention to illuminate this (small) social-scientific world from different points of view and to take advantage of it for constructing a more systematic and deeper understanding of the social construction of social-scientific knowledge.

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A number of authors (actors) have contributed to the recently opened *FQS* debate, "Doing Successful Research in the Social Sciences—Ethnography of Career Politics of an Occupational Group." Diverse roles or parts have become evident in the play of the social sciences, each of them connected to certain views, perspectives and foci. These roles included an applicant for research funds in his communication with the deciding committee, a member of the committee deciding on the application, and a producer of a scientific article strategically positioning references in articles. [1]

We articulated the intent to have the perspectives from such diverse actors in our opening editorial: we wanted to see participants in the social sciences and their perspectives in their respective fields of action. The resulting articles turned out to constitute an interesting and instructive source that has the potential to enrich our knowledge about the social science milieu. Political-administrative, mass media, and professional sources dominate the public (meta-) discourse about the social sciences. The academic milieu privileges certain (self-) representations and marginalizes others. By creating a forum for a broader and more differentiated range of perspectives, we hope to illuminate this area to give the self-representations a greater depth of field. [2]

The academic insiders' views, assessments, and measures tend to represent the business-as-usual aspect typical of a "normal science" (KUHN, 1970). Anything that could bother business as usual is kept on the outside and is marginalized. To achieve this marginalization, insiders make use of a multitude of knowledge/power techniques (formal and informal rules, admission- and

exclusion-procedures, taboos, or sanctions). Investigating the milieu of the social sciences *as a milieu among others* that social scientists (legitimately) attend to (e.g., in empirical research on small social worlds, their front and back stages) means breaking a taboo. The (qualitative) social scientists normally provide subtle milieu studies (ethnographies) from diverse social communities and subcultures (the homeless, families, patients, homosexuals, or police,—even from natural scientific contexts); these protagonists often do not back off from breaking subcultural taboos concerning access and thematization—without risking their scientific reputation. In contrast, their *own* milieu seems to be an *exceptional territory* for the same social scientists who nevertheless take their critical look elsewhere. What goes for other social fields and the social scientists' behavior there (scientific curiosity, uncovering, representation, documentation, etc.) does not go here. It is not allowed. [3]

In this issue, [Günter BURKART](#) explains and justifies this attitude. In *On Taboos of Thematizing and the Impossibility of Doing a Sociology of Sociology*, he argues from an insider perspective—being a full member of the sociological subculture—that sociological reflection of the scientific sociology ("radical sociology") has disturbing consequences for the scientific research routine and its foundations. From this point of view the debate centering on a social science of the social sciences featured in this journal is both impossible and unnecessary. [4]

In Laura's Doctorate, [Angelika BIRCK](#) exhibits the milieu of the social sciences (mainly the academic psychology) from another perspective, telling a tale of an errant doctoral student attempting to conduct and complete her study, caught in the hierarchical structure of professorial and institutional power. BURKART and BIRCK deal with two positions and perspectives that could hardly be more opposed. [5]

In a specific literal manner ("A Satire in Seven Acts") BIRCK describes the milieu of the social sciences from the perspective of a candidate for membership in the academic subculture, who tries to pass the gate, a necessary point of passage (LATOURE, 1987), that is, completing a doctoral thesis. On the one hand, the protagonist's fate is determined by her attempt to follow the gatekeepers' instructions to the point of the letter, exactly and conscientiously. On the other hand, she was unfortunate in her choice of topic and method, neither of which relevant academic co-actors appreciated (though in different ways). She has also become entangled in the diverse levels of internationalism (or, perhaps, provincialism) of university institutions and their associated bureaucracies, personal career ambitions, and vanities of the gatekeepers. [6]

According to the regulations of the milieu, BIRCK's protagonist is quick and eager to learn. But in the eyes of relevant representatives of the subculture her efforts do not conform and do not reflect the "state of the art." This leads to situations where she is given instructions that constrain her to give up her topic and stubbornness or to remain frustrated at the margins of the milieu. BIRCK describes a case where the doctoral student becomes entangled in a social and

institutional structure infused by bureaucracy resulting in a truly Kafkaesque scenario. [7]

Günter BURKART gives reasons, why texts like the one from Angelika BIRCK are impossible as *documentary accounts*. We, the moderators of the debate, therefore encouraged Ms. BIRCK to write a *fictional text* that illustrates a problem and a certain perspective: slogging and sweating on a stony and sometimes grotesque road full of obstacles towards graduation. We want to give such texts a forum that is normally not found in social scientific journals. In our view, there are many reasons to broaden and modify the formats and genres of scientific publications—for instance, the delicate character of our topic suggests experimentation. (We are not the first who have had this idea; fake science and campus novels are examples for other formats.) [8]

In a certain way BIRCK's text is "science fiction." The author discusses particular characteristics of the milieu and the behavior of its actors. Her account takes the form of a "drama." Because BIRCK herself succeeded to graduate despite having to take a rocky road, we can assume that her fiction was motivated by and is saturated with experience. [9]

BIRCK's fictionalized case study makes us or should make us think. The author will probably welcome actors of the milieu of the (social) sciences who recognize themselves in her text as a "type." She reports that several doctoral candidates read her text and could relate to her experiences. A social scientist writing under the pseudonym Sylvia Curruca presented an analogue case of graduation from the perspective of a doctoral candidate using the genre of "a melodrama in five acts and three overtimes" (CURRUCA 1993, p.21). But it may be that BIRCK's account is regional, being more typical of a more traditional European university systems and academic culture than of the student-as-customer-oriented North American system and culture. [10]

The question whether the depicted events are representative or typical of the milieu of the social sciences at universities should be of interest for those qualitative social scientists who take single cases seriously and treasure and appreciate them in special ways. Participant actions and courses of events as described by BIRCK may indeed reveal some characteristic and essential patterns and structures of academia and its routines for conduction scientific research. [11]

In addition to the questions, "Are such events possible?" "What cultural features allow them to occur?," and "What can we learn from them?," we can justly ask, "For what institutional structures, subcultures and actors are such phenomena characteristic?," "Where do we find them and where not?," "Are they possible in the university structures of 'old Europe' but not in the universities and colleges of North-America?," "Do the causes for such events lie in public nature of universities and the civil-servant mentality of the actors?," "Would such events be possible in private universities and their greater customer orientation?," "What is the role of the gendered behavioral patterns in the professional contact with

women?," and "Do women act or act differently as gate keepers in the the social sciences?" These and other questions may be addressed in future contributions to our debate. [12]

The problem described here may bear certain parallels with fraud and hoax in science. In this regard, scientific subcultures had for the longest time taken the position that "something like that" is alien, unthinkable, and impossible in scientific knowledge production process. Such a position stems from the idealized self-conception of scientists concerning their identity-constituting commitment to the maxim of truth. Actual, documented cases make it impossible to ignore such phenomena, however awkward they may be and however much they sound like whistle blowing. In the natural sciences, fraud and hoax have been ardently discussed—not in the least because of the infamous cases of cold fusion and N-rays. (Interestingly, Alan SOKAL's [1996] fraudulent *Transgression the Boundaries* has never been discussed as such but as a clever deconstruction of the social sciences.) Enlightened science research does not only thematize fraud and hoax in the sense of a scandal. It explores the structural basis, the "system conditions" of such phenomena that arise in certain forms of the scientific production process (non-transparency, technological penetration, teamwork, or concurrence) and the relation of science and economy (financing of science or economic utilization of scientific knowledge). [13]

We do not wish our debate to scandalize. As a subculture, we need to inspect the assumption that the cases and phenomena BIRCK describes have a structural and systematic basis in certain forms of the (social) scientific research routine. We therefore wish to continue this debate in a courageous manner rather than to call it off as it might be implied by BURKHART's contribution. [14]

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## Authors

[Franz Breuer](#), [Jo Reichertz](#) & [Wolff-Michael Roth](#)

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