

On subjects, informants, audiences, and encounters. Contributions to reflexivity from engaged and detached forms of social research

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1.

All the papers in this symposium constitute critical reflections by the researchers themselves on their research process and outputs – something that, if it happens at all, is hardly published or discussed with a broader audience. They are thus highly welcomed contributions to the promotion of reflexivity in social research.

In this overview of the symposium, I'll focus on issues concerning the relations between the researchers and the "researched" as well as in the knowledge claims attached to these different statuses. Each paper presents of course a different approach to reflexivity – I'll refer to each paper's singularities, and I'll then try to end this article by raising a few questions of concern to all of them.

2.

The piece by Mota Santos and Alzetta, entitled "The camera tends to lie and the audience tends to believe", discusses film as a means of knowledge production and dissemination, based on a shared experience of ethnographic film-making in a European project on experiences of inclusion/exclusion of youth with a migration background. The text thus deals with visual methods and their use in ethnographic research. As the authors outline, film was particularly useful in their research project for various reasons. However, they also adequately criticize the objectifying nature of the film as a "politics of representation".

First of all, film was supposed to be closer to the experience of the "researched". The authors present it as a useful "non-homogenizing" method of producing and presenting results that came close to the creative and socially constructive experience of migrant descent youth creating their place in society. This is a worthwhile thought and opens up a broader question: can a "creative method" as such reflect better than others social processes that are creative? This deeply epistemological questioning would deserve more intense discussion within the concerned scholarly community. We cannot satisfyingly answer to this question here. But I would like to hint at a related issue: what is for

sure is that, if seen, as the authors do, as a co-participatory method involving the "researched", the cross-checking of research results by the youth themselves is better ensured when using film than when writing up esoteric social scientific texts for obscure scientific journals – to put it crudely. As Sitas reminds us, reflecting upon his own critically engaged research experiences, "we have been convinced that the 'researched' is different from a piece of chalk. (...) The 'researched' talked back, argued, resisted the classifications and pointed out that the researcher, professor, sir or madam, was also part of the field (...)" (Sitas 2004, p. 41).

In this respect, the argument for film as a method and form of research output taking into account specific interests and self-perceptions/representations of the researched subjects is a particularly valuable one. However, the authors also highlight themselves in adequate ways that visual methods do not simply *reflect* reality but *represent* reality. Besides the knowledge dimension, power relations always come into play when reality is captured through film, including, as the authors state, "questions of alignment and identification". Obviously, the topics of inclusion/exclusion of youth with a migration background perfectly lends itself to such forms of knowledge production and dissemination. Yet, it also makes the power dimension between the researchers and the "researched" particularly challenging – how did both sides negotiate the final product and what it means to them? Interestingly, the authors themselves write about the concerned youth as "the social actors who are the subjects of our research and of our filmmaking", not "objects of research". Unfortunately, a more detailed description and discussion of the particular relationship the research teams established with the youths in question is missing.

We can imagine still another field of power relations in the production of the film, as it also required a considerable effort in collaborative work between social scientists from different countries. Here, the authors outline the implications in an amazingly critical and open-minded manner. They especially insist on the "blanks" in the production of the film, i.e. the mass of material that was left out of the end-product. If we

are left without knowing in how far the youth themselves were integrated into this step of the research, they clearly describe the framework for collaboration between the different research teams. Here, it would indeed seem to be worthwhile to apply the “anthropology of the laboratory”-method (Latour, Woolgar 1979) in order to follow more closely the process of selecting and sequencing of the film material.

Finally, the film has a “public sociology” dimension (Burawoy, 2004): it is also meant to serve in the popularization of research results to a broader audience. More precisely, the film was meant to be a starting point for reflection and discussions around the topic of inclusion/exclusion with a youth audience. The sociologists are thus somehow mediating between the individual experiences of youth covered by the film and a potential broader audience to be animated through the film. Therefore, the film cannot only be regarded as a form of research output, but as a didactic tool, accessible to a broader (yet specific) audience. Here again, it could be challenging to push the experience a step further. Why not take the film-making as a step in a prolonged research process? A second phase of research could follow, feeding issues raised through the discussions with youth around the film into a renewed discussion of the results from the first phase. This could result in a longer-term project with reiterated intense exchange between the researchers and the “researched”.

The paper concludes that film is a “tool that entails certain dangers of which the social scientists/filmmakers should be aware of and should make their audiences aware of also”. But the question remains: how can the researchers make the audience aware of the dangers included in their work?

3.

The article “‘No comments?’ Can commentary be a means of expression for the social scientist?”, by Emmanuelle Savignac is actually a reflexive commentary on a commentary – a reflection on the practice of social scientists who decided to appear as commentators in a television show. Again, it is rare to have a such detailed description of the practice and collective decision-making processes among social science scholars, and the empirical detail of the process that made the concerned group of social scientists arrive at the decision to deliver their commentaries is necessary in order to apprehend the broader methodological and epistemological questions the article raises. Actually, the process raised various questions. A pragmatic one, related to the difference in the nature of practice in the scholarly domain as opposed to practice in mass media, mainly related to time frames. While scholars need enough time to analyze phenomena in an in-depth mode and to prepare well thought-through outputs, usually in the form of written text that they submit to their peers for critical review, mass media work under time constraints and commentaries have to be quickly

available – social scientists thus needed to overcome their scholarly “perfectionism” and expose themselves to possible criticism.

Secondly, the act of participating in mass media production as a commentator made sociologists doubt the practice of commenting itself: do sociologists actually ever do anything different from commenting? What is the epistemic difference between the output of a sociology analysis and a television commentary, if there’s any?

Furthermore, the text raises the issue of how sociologists are turned into experts, not out of their self-recognition and self-identification, but because of the demand they received from the television producers who attribute them the status of experts. But what is actually the relationship between their sociological knowledge on the world of work and the representation of this reality of work and workplaces in the media?

The result the author arrives at is surprising but deserves further reflection: “In that perspective, commenting can be considered as helpful for the social scientist. Its relativity (towards the object of the commentary, because of its constant relation to conjuncture and because of its individual endorsement) and its apparent weakness (with respect to the truth it is supposed to bring, not sustained by academics) could maintain the social scientist’s speech linked to his object, inscribed after previous speeches about this object, instead of linking the social scientist’s speech exclusively to his status (nevertheless necessary both on the media and the scientific field)”. The practice of commenting is thus recommended in order to help scientists be more reflexive and self-aware of one’s own scholarly practice.

4.

The contribution by Raúl Cabrera and Anika Meckesheimer pushes the level of reflexivity still further in proposing “a series of concepts for thinking of social research as a shared project of knowledge construction together with, not only about, social actors”. Their central concepts of “disidentification”, “anxiety” and “narration” serve to fundamentally question the conventional idea of the “researched” in the knowledge production process. In their approach, the authors conceive of the “researched” as subjects of the research process. Production of knowledge does not only and simply happen in academia, but also outside, in the non-academic “real” social world. What the authors suggest is to see the research process as an encounter between the two worlds, where knowledge and meaning have to be negotiated between both sides through exchange and dialogue. This necessarily raises the central epistemological question of the “situatedness” of all social knowledge on the one hand, and of the specificity of academic knowledge production on the other hand. It also touches upon ethical and pragmatic questions.

Situatedness of knowledge has been discussed in the social sciences from Marx – with class location and class consciousness – to Bourdieu – with knowledge as a form of social capital specific to each social field –, including, importantly, the feminist standpoint theory. However, beyond locations and standpoints, the authors imagine the research process as a process of negotiation between researcher and “researched”. Thus, social knowledge is conceived of as being prevalent in all domains of society, and what academics produce has to develop out of their engagement with non-academic social actors.

Interestingly again, such unconventional and engaged forms of research seem to be emerging outside the north-Atlantic domain in prominent ways today. For example, the broader South African community tends to uphold a model of “engaged sociology”, where central research questions are raised by the community, and research results feed into political practice. The research process as such remains an independent endeavor according to scientific, academic standards¹. Sitas, however, in his *Theoretical parables*, argues that “(...) the fence between the citadel of knowledge and science and the fields needs cutting. The problem contexts of the questions we need to answer will have to be a negotiation with the Mshengu, the Shelembuzes and others, learning is everywhere and theorizing too. [The author’s parables’ project, W.K.] asks of knowledge and reliability to be people-centered, generously abstract and contextually moral” (Sitas 2004: 69). What Cabrera and Meckesheimer propose, in similar terms as Sitas, goes beyond the vision of “engaged sociology” in viewing the whole of the process as a dialogue and exchange between academically-based intellectuals and non-academics, ideally on an equal footing. This is a challenging vision in as far as it questions, in a postmodern stance, the mere difference between academia and society at large as well as between social science knowledge and social knowledge as such. However, it is not the aim of the authors to debate these doubts but rather to provide a framework for the practice of a committed, ethical and reflexive sociology.

The question remains, after their general deliberations, of how to practically achieve this research as an “encounter”? Their own experience of long-term social-political engagement and academic work with communities in Chiapas has informed their attempt to reconcile and combine both. But it also shows how, in practical terms, the realization of the proposed project proves to be an extremely energy and time consuming process (Meckesheimer 2008). As such, it is certainly more than worthwhile and could help push the idea of reflexive social research much further: Here, we are not only dealing with a critical theoretical reflection, but their practical political engagement necessarily has to be constructive and solution-oriented at the

same time. It would thus be interesting to learn more about concrete forms of realizing the form of research they propose in their long-term work.

Furthermore, as Sitas suggests in the above quote, the proposed framework addresses a fundamental ethical question, namely, as the authors call it, that of the “legitimacy of subject of enunciation”. This entails doubts on the practice of social research as such: Why at all to do social science, for whom and for what? In whose interest? The privilege of the authors is to be forced – or enabled – to raise such issues through their confrontation with the politically strongly active people of the region of Chiapas. Here, social actors have been sensitized to the presence of intellectuals and are self-conscious, politicized and organized sufficiently to force researchers to address these questions. Apparently, this was not the case, for example, with the migrant descent youth, although the same questions would apply here.

Finally, this contribution is not only a methodological, epistemological and ethical challenge, but also an institutional and thus pragmatic one. The idea of research as a dialogical encounter radically confronts the strictures and structures imposed by the academic institution: “Let us reflect on the basis of those two moments – narration and the time for listening on the level of the relationship between social actors and researchers. Such a communicative encounter is possible if we practice an act of dismantling the institutionalized conditions which research implies and which in turn conditions our forms of acting and intervening in research”. This requires not only a self-critical attitude of the researcher (“disidentification”), but may as well lead to disadvantages in building an academic career. In times of institutionally imposed evaluation, where researchers receive credits for peer-reviewed, international publications, but not for in-depth engagement with non-academic actors, this is difficult. It is all the more amazing that both authors are doctoral researchers at the time of their writing and thus still have a career to build. Maybe this is also a lesson to learn in Europe or elsewhere from current practice in a Mexican university?

5.

To conclude, I would like to highlight three common points. Interestingly, two of the contributions are co-authored by at least two researchers and one is an individual reflection on a group-process. They thus emerge out of collaborative research efforts, my first point. Furthermore, these papers are not only co-authored, but coauthored by researchers with different cultural, linguistic and/or academic backgrounds. It thus appears that collective work and the discussions and compromises it necessarily entails, encourages reflective endeavors. We can also assume that crossing and confronting perspectives related to different backgrounds is especially productive in bringing to the fore meta-level questionings as well as unconvention-

¹ Personal communication with Eddie Webster, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, April 2004.

al, deeply critical, yet constructive forms of research.

Secondly, in two of the three papers the role and epistemic contribution of the “researched” are also reflected, turning them into subjects of the process. This relationship is the main focus of the piece by authors. This is what I call an engaged form of research. The framework proposed by authors also provides inspiration for a more experimental use of the film presented in the paper by Mota Santos and Alzetta, creating, as suggested above, a longer-term dialogue with migrant descent youth. Obviously, the abovementioned restrictions imposed through academic institutions and, importantly, funding mechanisms – such as the European Framework Program through which the project presented by Mota Santos and Alzetta was financed – are an important obstacle to such unconventional and engaged endeavors. We can be grateful to the authors of the papers for having achieved, with the available means and time, already a considerable level of reflexivity.

A last point I would like to make concerns references to existing literature. Two of the papers make a limited use of bibliography. This shows that experimental and collective forms of research can lead social scientists to think out of the box and to develop their genuinely own questionings and frameworks, irrespective of established classics, canons or fashionable themes and theorists. The critical question arises here: did the contribution by authors really need such prolific referencing, or could the authors be self-confident enough to make their argument according to their own terms²? Furthermore, it is interesting to note the strong presence of the French theoretical traditions throughout all contributions – from Durkheim and Tarde to Bachelard, from Foucault to Derrida, Deleuze and Lytord, from Latour to Bourdieu. This could be seen as a hint towards gathering the theoretical universe out of which the desired reflexive social science could be nourished, apart from collective reflexive processes. We should be deeply thankful to the editors of this volume to allow authors to write and publish this unconventional format of contributions. Their quality confirms that this is a more than worthwhile endeavor.

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² On the other side, the fact that authors present a much more elaborate bibliography might encourage the reader who is interested in reflexive social research to consider the theoretical production of southern post-modern theory, politically active social science as well as postcolonial theory emerging outside of the north-atlantic domain...