

# **A Companion to QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

**Edited by Uwe Flick, Ernst von Kardoff and Ines Steinke**

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## 5.16 Objective Hermeneutics and Hermeneutic Sociology of Knowledge

**Jo Reichertz**

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### 1 OBJECTIVE HERMENEUTICS

The term 'objective hermeneutics' refers to a complex *theoretical, methodological* and *operational* concept that derives essentially from the work of Ulrich Oevermann. In the interim the labels 'structural hermeneutics' and 'genetic structuralism' have also come into use.

Objective hermeneutics, which looks upon itself as a *Kunstlehre* (art), claims to be the fundamental method of investigation for *every* kind of sociological research. Consistently with this, it no longer only interprets protocols of everyday interaction but, in principle, also texts, and here painting, architecture, clues of criminal activity and the like are also understood as texts. The procedure consists of first conceiving and fixing the social action in question as a text, in order subsequently to interpret it hermeneutically with regard to action-generating latent meaning structures.

Initially, the concern was only with the 'reconstruction of *objective* meaning structures' of texts: what the text producers thought, wished, hoped, believed in the creation of their text, that is, what subjective intentions they had, was – and is – unimportant for objective hermeneutics. The only thing that counts is the objective meaning structure of the text in a particular linguistic and interactive community. Later the attribute 'objective' came to relate not only to the area of study: the validity of the findings obtained was also subject to the

requirement that they should, with the assistance of the procedure, achieve an objectivity of results.

Since objective hermeneutics, irrespective of what concrete object it has to analyse, is always primarily directed at the reconstruction of the latent sense structures or objective meaning structures of those expressive forms in which the object of investigation or the question under study is authentically embodied, one can require the same degree of objectivity of its findings or the assessment of their applicability as that which is taken for granted in the natural sciences. This is simply because the meaning structures which are to be reconstructed can be ascertained by means of fundamentally definable rules and mechanisms of a basic algorithmic structure in a precisely testable and complete way in a protocol that is accessible at all times. (Oevermann 1996: 4)

The validity of analyses must be ensured through a strict application of the hermeneutic *Kunstlehre* (art). An *objective reconstruction of objective structures* is understood as a limit that is reached through constant application of the canonical directives of objective hermeneutics.

#### **History of objective hermeneutics**

The development of the procedure of objective hermeneutics derives in essence from the 'parental home and school' major research project directed by Oevermann, Krappmann

Kreppner. This was concerned, from 1968 onwards, with the significance of the restricted and elaborated language codes for school achievement. The investigations were carried out in a purely quantitative way at the beginning of the research process. The inadequacy of the results thus achieved led to a fundamental reappraisal of the methods and to an examination of the Chomskyan competence-performance model, Piaget's learning theory and Freud's concept of traumatization.

Oevermann and the colleagues then working with him (in particular T. Allert, Y. Schütze, H. Gripp and E. Konau) worked on the development of qualitative *data collection procedures* until the beginning of 1970, and subsequently also on hermeneutic *analytical procedures*. The focus of this type of hermeneutics was not the long-standing German discussion of philosophical hermeneutics, but the criticism that had become especially vocal in the United States of the quantitatively focused form of sociological measurement. The new approach was set up, as far as methodology is concerned, with reference to Mead's theory of language, Searle's concept of rules and Peirce's abductive research logic (see 4.3).

Oevermann's work since 1980 has been concerned less with the further methodological justification of the method and more with theoretical concepts, practical consultancy and current political topics, such as the *theory of professions*, the *concept of structure*, the *organization of the police crime reporting service*, *media criticism*, the *meaning of religion*, the *development of innovation*, and repeatedly with problems in the *interpretation of paintings*. What is methodologically new is Oevermann's attempt to use 'fictional data' (dramas and novels) to reconstruct the structural logic of real actions (Oevermann 1997; see also the interesting debate in König 1996b).

Other authors who associate themselves with objective hermeneutics are, on the other hand, concerned primarily with further case analyses and discussion of the methodological and theoretical implications of the hermeneutic approach (cf. the collections of papers by Aufenanger and Lenssen 1986 and Garz and Kraimer 1994a, and the discussion of these in Schröer 1994 and T. Sutter 1997).

The concept of objective hermeneutics is currently one of the most prominent approaches in qualitative research in German-speaking

countries, including Austria and Switzerland, and it figures in all of the more recent methodological handbooks on qualitative research (e.g. Bohnsack 1999; Hitzler and Honer 1997; Lamnek 1995).

### *Strategies for empirical procedure*

Contrary to the erroneous widespread belief, there is not *one single* procedure for objective hermeneutic interpretation of texts. There is merely a kind of basic common understanding that manifests itself in differing and sometimes mutually exclusive variants. What is, of course, common to all variants is the belief that the three major obstacles to an unobscured exposition of meaning must be overcome *before* the analysis begins.

In the first place it is necessary to remove the pressure to act which universally dominates everyday life and which always prematurely interrupts the process of explaining meaning: in a word, it is vital to spend a great deal of time on the analysis. Then it is necessary to make sure that the interpreters are not subject to any neurotic and/or ideological blind spots – although how this is to be done, Oevermann does not make clear. Finally, one should ensure that the interpreters are competent members of the linguistic and interactive community being investigated, and so children are normally excluded.

In looking for the procedure of objective hermeneutics one will admittedly find in the relevant literature that there are to date three variants of text explanation, or more precisely, three forms for the *presentation* of one's own research practice.

- 1 The *detailed analysis* of a text at eight different levels, in which the knowledge and the external context, and also the pragmatics of a type of interaction, are explained in advance and are borne in mind in the analysis (e.g. Oevermann et al. 1979).
- 2 The *sequential analysis* of each individual contribution to an interaction, step by step, without clarifying in advance the internal or external context of the utterance (e.g. Oevermann et al. 1979: 412–429). This is the most demanding variant of objective hermeneutics, since it is very strongly oriented towards the methodological premises of the overall concept.

- 3 The full *interpretation of the objective social data* from all those who participated in an interaction, before any approach is made to the text to be interpreted (e.g. Oevermann et al. 1980). This variant handles the fundamentals of a theory of hermeneutics interpretation very flexibly and uses them in a somewhat metaphorical way.

The first variant initially found many adherents within qualitative research, not only because in its most important elements it is formalized and therefore easy to learn. The second variant now constitutes the real core of objective hermeneutics – texts are interpreted in detail step by step *without* using any knowledge of the case. A clear distinction must be made here between this and the third variant, which places the explanation of the objective case data before the text analysis. This version is particularly used when one seeks to economize the application of objective hermeneutics.

#### **On research logic**

In general objective hermeneutics conducts only single-case analyses. Standardized and large-scale data collections are rejected on methodological grounds, since only the collection of non-standardized data and their objective hermeneutic analysis would guarantee valid results. The validity of the analysis derives in particular from the correct application of the hermeneutic *Kunstlehre* (art). The separation between 'logic of discovery' and 'logic of verification' (Reichenbach, Popper) is thereby explicitly renounced: 'truth' results from the correct epistemological procedure, since the correct treatment of a text causes 'the thing to speak for itself' (Oevermann 1984: 11).

Objective hermeneutics proceeds from the singular (reconstruction of the structure of single cases) to the general statement (generalization of structure) by means of the principle of falsification; reconstruction of structure and generalization of structure are conceived of as the outer poles of a targeted research process in which the results of a number of single-case structural reconstructions are condensed into a more general structure. A case structure, once reconstructed, may be used in the interpretation of further examples of the same type as a heuristic to be falsified. The argument goes

approximately like this: in the course of text analysis there is a reconstruction of what structure is to be found in the text under investigation. This description should be as precise and distinctive as possible. If, in the course of the analysis of the text, a location can be found which contradicts the structural description previously spelled out, then the hypothesis may be said to be falsified.

The goal of structural generalization is always the discovery and description of both *general* and *single-case specific* instances of rule-governedness, the so-called generative rules which, according to Oevermann (1999a), have a status comparable to natural laws and natural facts. With the aid of this positive knowledge of the general and the single case soft prognoses for the future of an action system should be set up. Precise deterministic statements are, however, impossible: one can only indicate the scope for transformations.

#### **On actuality**

The procedure of objective hermeneutics is currently viewed as one of the most widespread and reflective approaches in German qualitative research. There is, however, no 'school' of objective hermeneutics, but only a range of scientists who have recourse to the procedure of objective hermeneutics in their own research. The *Kunstlehre* (art) of objective hermeneutics can be learned, above all, from Oevermann himself in Frankfurt am Main. He offers regular courses for students and also for practitioners in which one can learn his technique for data analysis (see Part 7). As yet – in spite of all the efforts that have been made – there is no introduction authorized by Oevermann into the principles of objective hermeneutics. Apart from Germany, there are a number of researchers, particularly in Austria and Switzerland, who are exploring the possibilities of objective hermeneutics.

Major debates on the concept of objective hermeneutics have so far been confined to Germany. Reichertz (1986), for example, investigated a whole range of Oevermann's texts using a procedure that relied on objective hermeneutics and thereby reconstructed the development of the approach from a 'distanced inside view'. Liebau (1987), in his study of the socialization theories of Oevermann and Bourdieu, analysed in particular their concept of subject and its

effect on a theory of pedagogic action. H. Sutter (1997) brings together, from an insider's view, Gevermann's scattered writings into a unified theory and practice of objective hermeneutics.

## 2 HERMENEUTIC SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

The term 'hermeneutic sociology of knowledge' refers to a complex *theoretical, methodological and operational* concept that derives in its essentials from the work of Hans-Georg Soeffner. Initially the name 'sociological hermeneutics' (see 3.5) was more frequently used. Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge in this form developed out of this, on the one hand as a result of a criticism of the 'metaphysics of structures' in objective hermeneutics (cf. Reichertz 1986) and on the other hand as a result of a debate with the socio-phenomenological research tradition (Schütz, Luckmann; see 3.1).

This perspective is *knowledge-sociological* in that, beyond constructivism and realism, it investigated the major question of how action subjects on the one hand (have to) locate and adapt themselves in an apposite and socialized way in the historically and socially developed routines and meanings of a particular field of action, and how, on the other hand, they (must) constantly re-interpret and thereby also invent themselves 'individually'. The new (that is, constituted in accordance with the relevances of the action subject) re-interpretations of socially pre-interpreted knowledge, for their part, are then (again as knowledge) fed back into the social action field (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966; Soeffner 1989).

This perspective is *hermeneutic* in that, in its method-driven analysis of data, it follows the premises of 'sociological hermeneutics' (Soeffner 1989; Soeffner and Hitzler 1994a).

The perspective is *structural-analytical* because the behaviour of individuals is only considered to be understood if the interpreter is in a position both to put the observed behaviour into some relation with the frame of reference that is prescribed and is relevant to the particular type of action, and in this way also to demonstrate that it is meaningful.

Subsequently it is concerned, in reconstructing the action, with making visible (as stored knowledge) the structural and pre-stated problems and possibilities of action which, in working out

the 'egological perspective', can *legitimately be attributed* to the protagonist (cf. Reichertz 1991a). What is central here is admittedly not the reconstruction of the singular perspective that is known to the individuals in question. What is sought, therefore, is the rational *reconstruction* of types of egological perspective (cf. Hitzler 1991; Schröer 1997).

### *History of hermeneutic sociology of knowledge*

'Anyone who knows nothing about the act of interpretation and who does not feel obliged to take account of its premises and sequential structures, will – from the viewpoint of the scientific obligation to check – be interpreting in a simple way, that is on the basis of implicit everyday interpretative routines and plausibility criteria' (Soeffner 1989: 53). Accordingly, the 'understanding of something' naturally also includes the '*description and the understanding of understanding*' (1989: 53). These statements of Soeffner's not only are, in my opinion, essential constituents of any sociological hermeneutics, but they can also (from a historical point of view) be taken as starting points for this research strategy.

In precise terms, these requirements mean that the investigator who wishes to understand his or her observation must also observe *his or her own* action of 'understanding' (that is, his or her 'everyday world of hermeneutics'). Because of this requirement of 'application to oneself', sociological hermeneutics from the outset (and for some time before the arrival of 'radical constructivism'; see 3.4) was put into the precarious position of having to come to terms with the 'constructivist character' of observation and interpretation. This situation is 'precarious' because the self-application of sociology to the writings of sociologists brings to light the fact that the constructs of scientists may differ in terms of content but not in structure from those constructs which people create in their normal everyday life and which are observed and interpreted by sociologists.

### *Strategy of empirical procedure*

Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge wins recognition exclusively from empirical research. It investigates every kind of social interaction and

all types of cultural phenomena. Since its research strategy is not directed towards the discovery of general laws to explain human behaviour but rather the (re-)construction of procedures and typologies that humans use to familiarize themselves with and gain access to a constantly changing world, the systematic 'discovery' of what is new is of particular interest. This is made easier by means of a series of methodological precautions.

For example, in the first phase of a piece of research the investigator should focus on building up an 'abductive attitude' (cf. Reichertz 1991b; see 4.3). This means that he or she should design his or her research in such a way that 'old' beliefs are seriously tested and, in certain cases, 'new' and more workable beliefs can be developed. This 'programme', however, can only be meaningfully implemented if the collected data are so constituted that their accountability in terms of the existing beliefs is not a foregone conclusion. The data must have the properties of a whetstone, and the interpreter must be forced abductively to grind down, or re-sharpen, his or her existing prejudices.

The most resistant data, in my opinion, are those that are collected in a *non-standardized way*, that is to say, audiovisual recordings and tape-recorded protocols (cf. Reichertz 1991a). Since such data are not produced by informants in response to any particular research question and the collection is not marked by any subjective observation schemata, there is a high probability that they cannot automatically be accounted for by the pre-existing beliefs.

If the collection of non-standardized data is not possible or does not make sense, researchers are obliged to produce the data themselves: they must create observation protocols and conduct interviews – and it would be advisable to do this according to scientifically binding standards. This will then lead to the production of data which, for their part, bear the hallmark of (scientific) standards.

In this the following two collection principles should be observed. (1) Researchers, in respect (*only*) of the facts to be investigated, should enter the field as *naively* as possible and collect data (cf. Hitzler 1991). (2) Particularly in the entry phase it should be ensured that the data collection will be as *unstructured* as possible. The reason for this is that a premature analytical and theoretical permeation of the material, and a data-collection process that focuses on this in

the entry phase, would lead to a blunting of the data whetstone on which subsequent theories ought to prove themselves and develop. If investigators apply these two principles in the collection of standardized data, then this will at least open up the possibility that the data will 'set them thinking' and cause them to question 'old' beliefs (cf. Reichertz 1997).

### ***The logic of research***

An interpretation of data with the assistance of sociological hermeneutics of knowledge does not stop at the appropriate description of observations or the depiction of subjectively developed and intended meaning. It aims, rather, at the discovery of the *intersubjective* meaning of *actions*. But '*intersubjective*' in no way corresponds to 'true' or 'real', but merely that it is a question of the meaning that is engendered by means of a (linguistic) *action* within a particular interaction community. The meaning of an action is thereby (partly) equated with the willingness to react that may be *anticipated* and which is set up by the action within an interaction community.

The interpretation theory therefore relates to the imaginative power of a typologized and typical user of a symbol who has been socialized within a particular interaction community. It does not, however, relate to the concrete content of his or her consciousness.

To put this in brief and placating terms: the meaning of symbolic action does not lie buried in the consciousness of the user of a sign, neither does it manifest itself in some codified reference (that is, it is not to be found in the past). It is rather the case that the meaning of a sign consists of the *willingness to react that may be anticipated* and of the *realized reactions* that the symbol stimulates in the interpreting group (that is, it is to be found in the future).

In methodological terms sociological hermeneutics pursues the following route: in the entry phase the data protocol is subjected to 'open coding' (Strauss 1987; see 5.13), which means that the document in question is analysed sequentially, extensively and in detail, and indeed line by line or even word by word. What is decisive in this phase is that no (pre-existing) readings are applied to the text, but rather that the investigator constructs as many readings as possible that are compatible with the text. This

type of interpretation requires the interpreter repeatedly to break down both the data and the (theoretical) prejudices and assessments, and this creates a healthy climate for the discovery of new readings.

If, in the phase of 'open coding', one is looking for meaning units (which naturally always already contain theoretical concepts or play with and refer to these), then in the second phase of the interpretation one is looking for more highly aggregated meaning units and concepts that bind together the individual partial units. In addition, one may now define good reasons as to why certain data should be collected again or in greater detail. And so in the third phase new data protocols are produced in a more targeted way. In this way the interpretation controls the data collection, but at the same time – and this is more important – the interpretation is falsified, modified and extended by means of the later data collection.

The process is complete when a highly aggregated concept or meaning configuration has been found or constructed, into which all the investigated elements can be integrated in a meaningful whole, and when this whole has been made intelligible (that is to say, meaningful) in the context of a particular interaction community. The question of whether the interpretation achieved in this way actually corresponds to the 'reality in the text' is meaningless, because sociological research is always concerned only with 'social reality' (examples are in Soeffner 1997).

#### **Current perspectives**

Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge is currently taught and practised mainly in German-speaking universities (Konstanz, Dortmund, Essen, St Gallen, Vienna), and yet there is no

'school' of hermeneutic sociology of knowledge. Admittedly a whole range of German, Swiss and Austrian scholars from different sociological disciplines refer explicitly to this research strategy. There is still no 'official' introduction into the procedures of hermeneutic sociology of knowledge, but Soeffner (1989) and Soeffner and Hitzler (1994a) are considered to be the basic texts. In addition, Schröer (1994) provides a source in which research methods in particular are presented and discussed, while the work of Hitzler et al. (1999) gives special attention to an outline of the theory and the methodology.

A first systematic description of hermeneutic sociology of knowledge may be found in Schröer (1997), while Reichertz (1991a) and Knoblauch (1995) present two methodologically well-founded approaches to research. T. Sutter (1997) offers a basic examination of hermeneutic sociology of knowledge.

#### **FURTHER READING**

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