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Visual Sociology for Research and Concept Development

Graphic and film material – additional ways for gaining knowledge

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1. Introduction
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1. Introduction

Although sociology is traditionally based on text, society – the topic of sociology – can be represented in different ways. Beyond verbal and written descriptions, images, as illustrated in graphics, photos and video material, open new ways for gaining knowledge. Since possibilities and frontiers of sociological research are determined and limited by methodology, the use of images constituting an innovative methodology provides new research perspectives. The International Visual Sociology Association addresses this topic:

“The purpose of the IVSA is to promote the study, production, and use of visual images, data, and materials in teaching, research, and applied activities, and to foster the development and use of still photographs, film, video, and electronically transmitted images in sociology and other social sciences and related disciplines and applications (www.visualsociology.org).”

Methodological work with ‘images’, particularly to generate knowledge in interdisciplinary work research in the ISF Munich, can be considered as contribution in the sense mentioned above.

Below you will find a strongly abridged version of an article on cooperative and subject-related concept development in work sociology by means of video sequences. The complete article is published in:

Wolfgang Dunkel, Stephanie Porschen, Margit Wehrich (2006): Kooperative und gegenstandsbezogene Konzeptentwicklung - Auf der Suche nach kooperativen Formen der Erkenntnisgewinnung in der Arbeitsforschung [Cooperative and subject-related concept development – in search for cooperative forms of gaining knowledge]. In: Wolfgang Dunkel; Dieter Sauer (Hrsg.): Von der Allgegenwart der verschwindenden Arbeit - Neue Herausforderungen für die Arbeitsforschung [On the total presence of diminishing work], edition sigma, Berlin, S. 93-110.

2. Cooperative and subject-related concept development¹

In search of cooperative forms to generate knowledge in interdisciplinary work research

2.1 The problem: how to generate cooperation in interdisciplinary work research?

¹ Many thanks to Frank Seiss who translated the abridged text by Dunkel, Wehrich and myself for the conference paper.

This contribution deals with a method to organize theoretical research work in a cooperative way. This method has been developed and tested in the context of an aspect of categorial redefinition of “work,” viz. in the context of extending the concept of work by the dimension of “interactive work.”

The theoretical concept of interactive work also applies to cooperation between scientists. A central feature of interactive work is used as the basic idea for the method of cooperative concept development: the necessity to refer to a shared subject is at the same time a favorable precondition for cooperation; and cooperation, in turn, is a natural premise of productive interdisciplinary work.

Two levels of problems have to be addressed in developing a method of cooperative concept development: the first level is represented by the question how cooperation processes between scientists can be institutionalized, especially if they work in different disciplines of science; the second level is represented by the question under which conditions such cooperation will yield productive results in the sense of an improvement of a theoretical concept.

2.2 The method of cooperative and subject-related concept development based on video material

Reference to a shared subject

Cooperation problems between scientists from different scientific fields may be eased in advance if they have a shared subject they can refer to. It is not sufficient, however, to indicate a common topic of a meeting as an orientation for the participants’ contributions. This way of proceeding might involve the problem that the participants simply present their own research projects under a topic-related title, and as a consequence, the subjects referred to might be heterogeneous. In this case the other participants will only function as an audience during the presentation.

A shared research subject, however, does not yet guarantee a productive cooperation. It is necessary to find a subject rich enough in content to support concept development. For this reason, the selection of the proper subject depends on the kind of concept to be developed. As, in our case, the analysis of actual interaction processes in interactive work was the central topic of the meeting, the shared subject should represent these processes in a most comprehensive form. We decided on using the medium of video because this medium permits a comprehensive perception of interaction processes, not reduced to spoken words as in texts or transcripts, but also including non-verbal expressions, movements in space, and the material context of interaction.

This meant that we compiled compact discs with selected video sequences and sent them to all participants at an early stage of the preparation of the workshops. Each participant got the instruction to present his/her perspective upon interactive work and introduce it into discussion on the basis of the video material all of them had received. Thus, video films, not much used in sociology as to now, served as a means of focusing and bundling different approaches to interactive work in the context of cooperative concept development.

Cooperative concept development in workshops

This concept was used in two interdisciplinary workshops. The first one dealt with “interactive work in the sector of services”. Sequences from a documentary film that showed service interactions in four hairdresser’s shops in Berlin were compiled on a compact disc. On the basis of this material, the participants of the workshop were to analyze and interpret the service interactions between clients and hairdressers, using the concrete pictures of the videos.

The second workshop had the topic of “interactive work and cooperative action.” All participants received a compilation of video sequences about cooperation in the processes of production and design work. This material was designed to allow for a multi-medial analysis of cooperation situations emerging in production work in an industrial plant and in planning and design processes of engineers and architects.

In both cases, scientists coming from different disciplines were involved: sociologists, psychologists, economists, etc. The general conditions were: restricted number of participants (not more than 20), relatively short presentations and relatively long discussion phases, visualization of the shared subject. The workshops were divided in two parts: the first part (somewhat longer than the second) was dedicated to the presentation and discussion of the participants’ interpretations of the video material. In the second part, the results as to the aim of the workshop—improving the understanding of interactive work—were collected and systematized. In this way, the development of a concept of interactive work should be supported.

2.3 Feedback concerning the work with video material in the frame of cooperative concept development

In the first workshop, “interactive work in the sector of services,” the impression emerged that the participants enjoyed the task of presenting and discussing their ideas about the interactions displayed by the videos. This might partially be due to the shared subject itself, i.e. the documentary film which was entertaining and sometimes even amusing. In order to develop conceptual ideas from a “case,” it is obviously possible to use entertaining media as a starting point. It is not necessary to restrict oneself to uninspiring research reports.

As to the second workshop, “interactive work and cooperative action”, the participants produced many reactions, including enthusiastic responses but also some criticism. It had been not so easy to find adequate video material for the preparation of the workshop, which finally was provided by some scientists. As a consequence, the context knowledge about the subject was in equally distributed. This problem was addressed by some participants. Even though interactive work mainly manifests in the form of situative actions, scientists are accustomed to include the general context conditions into their analyses and interpretations. On the other hand, the video sequences were also seen as a challenge—as an experiment how far the own approach permits an interpretation of the interaction sequences even without additional context knowledge.

The video material allowed for different strategies of utilization: it could be used for an interpretation of the displayed sequences with the aim of understanding the respective cooperation processes as good as possible, but it could also be used to challenge the theoretical understanding of cooperation. This implies two demands: to interpret the concrete data displayed, and to introduce an own model of interpretation. As this is a difficult task, the video material was often simply used as a “bridge” for feeding own empirical research results into the discussion process. But even though this implied that the research question could not

exclusively be approached from the shared subject itself, the nexus with the video sequences provided for a better accessibility for all participants.

The workshop material was considered a fascinating means especially by those scientists who had never before worked with that medium. On the other hand, it was considered an innovative suggestion to develop new forms of documentation of reality and use them in work research. Thus, the video material was also perceived as a chance of extending the comprehensiveness of empirical research. This possibility is especially promising if the research centers upon topics that are not so easily perceived *prima facie*, as is the case with interaction and cooperation in work.

2.4 Results

In both workshops, the constitution of a shared subject proved to be useful and successful. As the participants had to apply their specific conceptual approaches to a shared subject, a certain comparability of the different perspectives could be ensured. In both cases, the different perspectives were considered as mutually complementing rather than mutually replacing each other. However, certain aspects of the shared subject are very important for the cooperation in the workshop, in order to make this mutual complementation productive for theoretical work:

- An equal distribution of knowledge about the shared subject among the participants helps to ensure that this is a cooperation of experts who are familiar with the general topic of the workshop.
- It is helpful if the material comes from persons who are not participants of the workshop.
- The work upon the shared subject is stimulated if all participants have a certain context knowledge at their disposal.
- The shared subject should be as consistent as possible so that all participants are able to focus upon it with the same intensity,
- but it should also include many facets of the topic, representing the interesting aspects in a most comprehensive way.

If these conditions are met, establishing a *cooperative* concept development in a workshop seems to offer good prospects. Moreover, the unusual medium of video appears to be very attractive, as the participants invested work into the preparation of their contributions to an astounding degree. With reference to the cooperative *concept development*, a mere addition of different features should be avoided. In this respect, the method of “mapping” proved useful, as it allows for a systematic connection of the results from the discussions about the video sequences.

However, the cooperative subject-related concept development is not so suitable for deeper concept work or for the development of a theory with high universality claims. This restriction shows the limits of a method that concentrates upon a narrow and decontextualized part of social reality: it is very useful to evoke a subject-related cooperation between an interdisciplinary group of scientists but the focusing becomes a problem if deeper theoretical work is intended. In the latter case a contextualization of the subject is necessary: empirically by systematic contrasting with other cases, target-oriented survey methods, use of quantitative data etc.; theoretically by referring to other theoretical approaches relevant for the subject.

But notwithstanding this restriction: Our results show that the cooperative and subject-related concept development proves a useful means for work research and, more generally, for social

science research as a whole, if an interdisciplinary and inter theoretical cooperation has to be established for the work upon shared research questions.

2.5 Continuative literature:

Dunkel, Wolfgang; Rieder, Kerstin (2004): Interaktion im Salon - Analysen interaktiver Arbeit anhand eines Dokumentarfilms zum Friseurhandwerk [Interaction at the hairdresser's – analysis of interaction work based on a documentary film on the work of hairdressers]. ISF Munich, book and multimedia-cd.

Porschen, Stephanie; Bolte, Annegret (2005): Zugänge zu kooperativer Arbeit - Analysen zum Kooperationshandeln in Arbeitssituationen [Approaches to cooperative work – analysis of cooperation action in working situations]. ISF Munich, book and multimedia-cd.