Lecture at the
WORLD CONGRESS
FOR
SOCIOLOGY

9. – 12.7.1990

HUBERT KNOBLAUCH
„Leaving out the Methodologist’s Work“
Leaving out the methodologist's work

Hubert Knoblauch

Introduction

In this more elaborate version of what I would like to propose in a shorter and more colloquial way at Madrid, I want to tackle methodological problems. That is, I do not want to argue on the ontology of the Social Sciences; my statements do not refer to a theory of social reality. I would rather make a proposition concerning the question how we can make empirical statements about this reality. As I am to present only a short paper, I cannot develop a detailed theory; what I want to say has a rather programmatic status. At least by means of some references I would like to hint at the fact that the problem in question is a problem worth to be tackled.

In formulating my proposition, I used a title which alludes to an earlier essay by Peter Eglin.¹ When Eglin made the reproach that most human scientists forget that their interpretation already rely on their subjects' preinterpretations, he asked for hermeneutic methods in analyzing social actions and the corresponding texts. In the meantime critiques of this kind have been widely accepted. Nevertheless in presenting analyses of everyday communication one makes still the experience to find oneself confronted with an attitude of puzzlement. Main stream scientists oppose the preoccupation with "trivial" everyday communication; they bother about the linguistic turn in sociology and they categorize this analyses in terms of "microsociology" as subordinated to macrosociological concerns of big relevance. Quite often we are in a kind of legitimation stress which, as I will argue, is due to the fact that the development of methodological reflection on what we are doing has been left out. Nowadays quite a few sociologists are acquainted with such methods.

Although the necessity of a hermeneutic understanding is nowadays widely accepted, the methods which have been developed out of that conviction are still at a loss being confronted with the main stream sociologist's question "So what". The "so what" question has three possible reasons. First, people concerned with questions of "big relevance" estimate investigations of small scale interactive procedures, such as gossip, informal situations or even greeting rituals, as being of minor importance. This may be grounded in rather "political" circumstances. But there is a second intrinsic reason: even if the methodological importance of a hermeneutic dimension in the science of social action is accepted, this is done as to say tongue in cheek: Applying still the same "unsensible" methods, one just adds a methodological legitimation accounting rhetorically or intuitively for society's members' preinterpretations. This may be due to misunderstandings in the main stream sociology. I would however propose that the reason for the fact that methods based on a hermeneutic conception of sociology are questionable even by scientists who accept their methodological importance may to be seen in shortcomings in their own methodology. This argument has three parts. 1) The methodology of Alfred Schutz provides one important foundation of a hermeneutic sociology. This methodology, although widely accepted

as legitimate basis of a hermeneutic sociology, justifies only a hermeneutic approach and clarifies the epistemological ground of a science of action in terms of a "proto-sociology". 2) If we take sociology as an empirical science of social action (please note the stress on each of the components), one has to take into account the possibilities of empirical access to the social world — and thus the chances to make legitimate propositions: methodology then has to transform Schütz's postulates especially with regard to the methods of intersubjective objectivation. 3) By claiming the central status of social action one arrives at a first, preliminary gradation of scientific methods with respect to their "derivatedness".

Subjectivity and the social world
Although Schütz has convincingly demonstrated that the meaningfulness of the social world requires a methodology which accounts for actors' preinterpretations, he himself remained ambivalently between a phenomenological-egological and a mundane, -life-world perspective. 2 The same ambivalence is even conceived in later methodologies which built on Schütz. Heritage f.e. discerns that ethnomethodological proposals "have struck some commentators less as an approach to the analysis of action, than as explorations of subjective consciousness..." 3 The reason for this ambivalence is to be found in the fact that Schütz's methodology itself rather lead to a subjectivistic path, whereas his followers developed rather objective methods for which his methodology does not account any more. (For the sake of the argument's clarity I am likely to simplify Schütz's position in this respect. 4) Starting with the Weber thesis the subject matter of sociology is social action, Schütz clarified the notion of meaning which is guiding social action, thus providing for the frame how to understand this kind of action. Even if we accept that meaning is the central category for sociology, we have to concede that, as social scientists, we do not encounter but objectivated meaning, knowledge, as it turns up in social action and interaction. This methodological restriction on the epistemological task of sociology, however, is hardly accounted for in the Schützean methodology.

Schütz was to stress the peculiarity of this subject matter: the social world is in any case a pre-interpreted world, and actors use these typified meaningful actions. The social sciences build up on these preinterpretations and develop, therefore, second-order constructs, that is: social scientific categories are based and derive from so called first-order categories of the actors themselves which have to be understood. 5 The central methodological question however is, how are these categories constructed?

5) Alfred Schütz, Wissenschaftliche und Alltagsinterpretationen...; a finding which is given
Schütz has been primarily concerned with the question of how the social world is constituted by means of meaningful action. This is: he did not provide for a framework of action itself, but rather for its conditions. Therefore he demonstrated the 1) complicated intersubjective processes involved resp. presupposed in social action, and 2) how meaning is constituted. Even in some of his own, rather material analyses (like f.e. "Making music together"), he did not go into the coordination of action itself but looked for the genetically prior constituent factors of intersubjectivity. From his point of view this has been a legitimate task as he wanted to show that communication is founded in intersubjectivity (which can be analysed phenomenologically and provides for the matrix of the social world). Schütz's argument laid the way to look first for the actor's interpretation of meaning prior to scientific construction, that is for a methodology which is inductive and hermeneutic at the same time.

If we however look for the subject-matter of this inquiry, we find - especially with respect to communicative action - a very different conception. Schütz himself laid stress mainly on the constitution of the subjective meaning of action. Therefore the aim of his sociological analysis should be to reconstruct personal types of actors, homunculi, endowed with a subjective (pre-typified) meaning, motives, and relevances. His methodological demands follow this line of thought. Subjective interpretation means the decoding of meaning from the point of view of the subject; adequacy meant that the social scientist construct should keep in touch (somehow) with the subjective meaning; thus we could construct a individual who disposes of certain means for action which he, so to say, actualizes in interaction.

Sociology and the natural social world

The task of sociology however is different to the phenomenologist's: whereas the latter analyses the conscious activities presupposed in experience and action and the constitution of meaning, the former starts off from an already constituted meaning, socially constructed and distributed (knowledge) and has to analyse its actualization in ongoing action and communication. Therefore the task is different from Schutz's subjectivistic approach. As Luckmann remarks, "there is no further justification for the stereotypical complaints about the "subjectivity" of meaning. Typifications of subjective meanings are rendered intersubjectively obligatory to a greater or lesser extent by the 'subjects' of sociological investigations themselves, and they are articulated in historical languages and formulated in narratives and many other genres of communicative reconstructions before sociological reconstruction." And this cannot be taken as a phenomenological idiosyncrasy; let's remember the early argument of Georg Simmel that "if society is conceived as interaction among individuals, the description of the forms of this interaction is the task of the science of society in its strictest and most essential sense." If we take the proposition

6) Thomas Luckmann, Phenomenology and Sociology.
8) Simmel, Georg, The Sociology of Georg Simmel. (Transl. by Kurt H. Wolff) Glencoe. Ill: Free Press 1950, 21f. The linguistic approach is quite similar. Thus Sapir f.e. stresses that society
that human activity is the subject matter of the social sciences is unchallenged, then the objectivations of what Weber called the meaning of action and Schutz the preinterpretations get at the core of what may be called the sociological business. A blattant example can be seen in the notion of motives. Schutz took motives as an element in the subjective projection of action; only as a kind of exercise he was analyzing the interconnections of motives in interaction, that is, the coordination of action through in order to and because motives. These motives however 1. are hardly accessible; 2) it is Schutz himself who is stressing that motives are constitutes subjectively; being once constituted they are transmitted socially and thus part of the objectivated social stock of knowledge. This perspective has been taken over by C. Wright Mills' concept of the (social) vocabulary of motives as well as by Blum and McHugh. They regard motives as what is produced by actors in communication, no more facing the problem of a subjective inspection or "subjective perspective. The possibility to look at these objectivated vocabularies is enhanced by another development. Sociology disposes of techniques which allow for investigating exactly these objectivations.

The revolution of the hundredth second

Sociology is able to use new methods of audiovisual recording which transform the methods used: instead of a reproducted conservation we can base analyses on a conserving registration. Thus we are almost unnoticed subject of a "revolution of the hundredth second", as Walter Benjamin called the possibility of endless reproduction. That is, we can work on social action in situ at any time. These new methods allow for the possibility to turn to the subject matter of sociology itself, social action in situ resp. to what Psathas calls the "occasioned corpus", that is the pracies actors use in the process of the social construction. Methodically one calls this a naturalistic approach. Such an approach however changes the possibilities of knowledge of the social world. "The registrating fixation of fleeting interaction processes, in which social reality is "realized" (...), opens the possibility for new methodological principles which have up to now non reflected consequences." We need not any more reconstruct indirectly how people did this or that, we need not rely any more on literary, "impressionistic"

"is only apparently a static sum of social institutions; actually it is being reanimated or creatively reaffirmed from day to day by particular acts of a communicative nature which obtain among individuals participating in it." Edward Sapir. Communication. Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences Vol. 4, 89, 1931, p. 78.


12) JB, 315.
description; the subject matter is at hand, any time. Thus sociology, as an empirical science maintains a "naive realism" and does not become a self mirroring based on a denial of the "metaphysics" of the presence. "In brief, sociology can be a natural observational science." It is exactly the stress laid on what is common sensically given what makes science tick. This does not mean that one "simply" relies on overt behavior. The hermeneutic double structure of meaningful action. i.e. of reflexivity (doing and understanding) does not allow any more for such rough distinctions. This becomes clear by a statement of Harvey Sacks: "When I started to do research in sociology I figured that sociology could not be an actual science unless it was able to handle the details of events, handle them formally, and in the first instance be informative about them in the direct ways in which primitive sciences tend to be informative - that is, that anyone else can go and see whether what was said is so. And that is a tremendous control on seeing whether one is learning anything."13

The Objectivity of Social Action

What may be registrated is, of course, first of all objectivated action. Conversation, communication in general, work processes, nonverbal behavior in general etc. Obviously communicative action becomes the center of such a sociology of social action which keeps so to say "positive data". (It is superfluous to add that the methods of analyzing presuppose of course a hermeneutic, interpretive stance which cannot be labelled positivistic at all.14) Such a new orientation may already detected from programmatic statements of Luckmann, a student of Schütz. Sociological explanation is based on a systematic understanding and description of the social world, especially of the socially objectivated, communicated meaning structures. "I am convinced that the lasting elements of sociological research neither consist in the world-explaining theories nor in simple action theories, but in the exact description and interpretation of big, middle and even minute contexts of action."17 Sociology as a "Wirklichkeitswissenschaft" has to be based on the analysis of social action and develop its theories inductively. (Ilja Srubar has recently shown that Schütz himself had a rather interactive conception of everyday life which stressed rather the "pragma" than the "cogitationes".18 We could coin this in much more

13) Of course one should not take recordings as identical with action, as Soeffner showed with reference to the time stances of actor/ interpreter.
17) Thomas Luckmann, Kultur und Kommunikation. Lecture given to the International Conference of the German, Swiss and Austrian Sociological Associations, October 1988.
colloquial terms. Take two people in a restaurant having an argument on the taste of the red wine. We could first try to reconstruct the typical motives which make people quarreling, we could look for the basic social relations of both, we could even take the quarreling as a compensation of some other, unsatisfied needs and so on (f.e. to look for life-style concepts which define the milieu in which people argue about a wine like this). In this case we would refer to other contexts than the one given. We would either refer to the "virtual" relation, the assumed objective structures, or to motives hidden deeply in the self end only vaguely manifested in the ongoing process. In the other case we just made the process itself the topic of investigation. We would look for the situative sequence of having an argument, we would possibly discover a pattern and be able to relate this pattern to similar or different ones with respect to similar of different topics, situations, members etc. Here we made the observable process itself the topic of our analysis, and we would talk on the actors as nothing but the ones producing the observed structure. As Soeffner stresses, scientists work in a system of texts which they produce out of the ongoing interaction.

Soeffner hints at this objective structure by the notion of interactive configuration which are the places of interactive products, i.e. the objective meaning of patterns of conduct and of habit plans (Mead). Methodical prerequisites are
- the scientist's Entlastung of pragmatic motives
- the systematic search for readings of texts which refer to the choices the actors had in the production of what is now a text.
- the objective backing of a final interpretation which comes about by comparing systematically the different readings. The scientist follows somehow Schütz's methodological postulates for scientific constructs. The scientist is 1) a non interested observer; there must be still a logical consistency in scientific constructions; but instead of subjective interpretations and of adequacy we find two other principles: a first principle we would call plausibility; a second principle action relevancy.

"The problems with which the scientist is preoccupied may be unproblematic for any human being on the social scene and vice versa. (...) Being fixed, the scientific problem alone defines what is relevant to the scientist and what is the frame of reference may be used."}

Whereas Schütz subordinates the patterns of Wirkensbeziehungen to a modell of a rational actor which turn out to be his aim. (GA I, 51f.) Instead other, f.e. Goffman's research does not aim at individuals and their psychology but at the syntactical relations which unify actions of different persons. The postulate of interactive relevancy is possibly best exemplified in a paper by Schegloff: "The fact that these interactions are structured by the participants' orientations does not serve (...) to make 'objective' analysis irrelevant or impossible; it is precisely the parties' relevancies, orientations, and thereby-informed action which it is our interest to describe, and to describe under the control of the details of the interaction in which they are

19] Soeffner, 22f.
realized. It is waht the action, interaction, field of action are to the parties that poses our task of analysis."22 Obviously Schegloff does not only on the actors' relevancies as subjective matter of sociological interest; hinting to the participants' orientations, he takes into account what may be called the hermeneutic task as stressed by Soeffner. This procedure establishes objectivity insofar as it 1) objectifies the methods of interpreting data, and 2) as it refers to what becomes effective objectively; that is it does not aim at the subjective meaning of an actor but at the objective meaning of actions. (62)

Status and classes of data
Starting off from the methodological primate of social action as core of social reality and the methodical demand of looking first at action itself one should propose a distinction of different kind of data by means of their degree of "derivatedness". Let me give a few examples.
It is evident that any scientific method is a method to produce data.23 But the methods used and the procedures presupposed in relating data to any notion of a social world, are quite different. In looking f.e. at the constitution of interview data in social research, one is able to distinguish, according to Luckmann, several historical levels. If the scientist is producing a text based on an interview, so he takes first of all his protocollled interview. Sociological interviews are obviously collaborative constructions of meaning; they assume that outspoken knowledge may be effective in certain situations which are not present. This is a reconstruction of what had been the process of interviewing. And during this process in turn the speakers may have reconstructed certain events which the interviewed happen to tell. Moreover the tale of the interviewed may even include again reconstructions of what he was told and so on. Thus already in interviews on f.e. the subjective reality we may be confronted with intricate dimensions of reconstructions, whereas in the final display this reconstructions are presented as what the whole life is about.24 The ''findings'' thus involve several levels of reconstructions in order to arrive at what is supposedly the subject matter of the research. Thus reconstruction and the underlying concept of a reality to be reconstructed is one procedure applied by social scientists.
Quite obviously, social scientists use a range of different techniques to make produce data, techniques which are related in different ways to the processes analyzed, i.e. the ongoing social actions to which they refer. As far as the social sciences are concerned with human affairs, they all presuppose some understanding of these affairs, be it in arm-chair theorizing on concepts, be it in counting noses, be it in interpreting utterances. Even the hermeneutic interpretation of natural interaction is a simulation of the context of its production at a

23) TL hermeneutics
different time by different persons. If we take as our point of departure that social action is at the core of these sciences, then we should account methodologically how what we are investigating is related to this subject matter. The degree of derivation from this subject matter could, then, be the criterion to account for this relationship. It was Aron Gurwitsch who identified several conscious processes which are based in the life world and are constitutive for scientific method. Science uses sophisticated procedures such as mathematization, idealization, formalization and abstraction. Abstraction for example is involved in counting, that is in transforming any act or person into numbers, whereas Schutz's construction of homunculi f.e. is "an idealization of those typifications and self-typifications that are continually practiced in everyday life." 23 Although I am not able to provide here for a systematic classification of data (not of genres of material, like written, spoken etc.), an empirically based methodology should be able to distinguish its data with respect to such procedures involved. Undoubtedly all these procedures are based on hermeneutic procedures - as the reflective subject matter requires. And in taking into account that these procedures, scientifically sophisticated, are social themselves, one should add a second dimension for such a methodological classification: the form of the social construction of scientific results (as f.e. the joint interpretation and control of analyses by a group of scientists or by single theorists, the forms and genres of presentation of scientific results, the grounding (and sampling) of empirical notions etc. A future methodology should be self-reflexive in this way, accounting for the methods of how scientific data and results are socially constructed; that is one of the tasks of a sociology of science, applied to sociology itself.

To sum up: Although the hermeneutics postulated by Schutz provides a fundamental basis for sociological hermeneutics, they form but & prerequisite for empirical work. If we take sociology to be an empirical science of social action, the postulate of subjective interpretation and of adequacy have to be transformed into what I call plausibility and interactive relevancy. The epistemological target cannot be subjective meaning, but interaction (which, of course, presupposes some understanding of typical meaning). Based on this assumption, methodology should be aware of the derivatedness of its claims with respect to the hard core of empirical data: social action itself. The task for sociological methodology then, is to develop a classification of data with reference to cognitive procedures, social processes and theoretical assumptions involved in constructing scientific findings.

I should finally stress that my proposition are methodological and not epistemological in nature. I do not want to restrict programmatically what sociology is about; the point I wanted to make is: If sociology is to be regarded (or starts to be) an empirical science of social action, then it should account methodologically for the centrality of this subject matter and its only indirect accessibility.

Hubert Knoblauch

Leaving out the methodologist's work

The presentation is concerned with two interrelated methodological problems of the sociological analysis of communicative processes. Starting from the common axiom that social action is the subject-matter of sociology, interpretive sociological methodology in the Schutzean tradition is still preoccupied with methodological assumptions which a) stress the individual social actor ("subjective interpretation", "adequacy") and which b) share at the same time an orientation towards a deductive methodology ("relevancy").

A suggestion for the transformation of these "individualistic" categories is put forward. The proposed transformation is described in terms of "plausibility" and "action relevancy" in order 1) to account better for the factual processes of communicative analysis, thus 2) to provide for a methodological legitimation for such analyses which is still lacking and 3) to stress the specific starting point of such investigations, namely interactively produced, "naturalistic" and "quasi-objective" data. Based on this proposition a heuristic distinction of several classes of data is suggested which allows for and is sensitive of the way data are produced (by sociologists or actors) and for their status with respect to "natural" communicative situations.