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Perceptions of Power and Democracy

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Analytical and Methodological Dilemmas of the Construction of Images: Perceptions of Power and Democracy

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This paper is searching into the understanding of political behaviour of Danish laymen by analysing interview data from a case study. The purpose is to unfold a *hermeneutics of the political subject*, which means uncovering opinions, understandings, perceptions and practices in relation to democracy, politics and political power - which de facto is “non-observable”. Subsequently it aims to condense, reconstruct and interpret meaning, thus adding to the political sociology of post modernity and the knowledge of political identity. The paper addresses following questions: How should we study political identity? How do people conceptualize and experience power in modern society, and from where do they acquire the elements that impact the formation of individuals “cognitive maps” or political images of society? How is power and politics dealt with? How do individuals perceive their own role in current democracy - e.g. do people feel that they have a say? The paper unfolds the analysis of the data from one respondent in a larger case study.

Aim of the study and scientific method

In a study under the auspices of The Danish Democracy and Power Study – “Billeder af magten” (Kristensen, 2003) – on which this paper draws, the focus is specifically on how the members of contemporary Danish society experience power and their own role in democracy. More specifically, the Power study focus on two questions: How is the individual perception of power and mediated politics related to personal ‘first hand’ experience, for instance at work, or with family or friends? And how does distance and scepticism co-exist with political engagement and knowledge based on experience? The basic approach is phenomenological, i.e. oriented towards the life-worlds of the interviewees, but it is analytically informed by discourse analysis.

The study implies a general inquiry of features of the socio-cultural world – dispositions, practices, processes – that constitute pre-conditions for peoples actual participation in politics and civil society. In short, these preconditions involve cultural attributes prevalent among citizens that can, in various ways, facilitate democratic life. This notion of civic culture is anchored in everyday life and its horizons, and can thus be seen as an important region of the habermasian life world with its negotiation of norms and values (Habermas 1996; Dahlgren 2003:

153-156). Culture consists of patterns of practices and meaning and they provide taken for granted orientations – factual and normative – as well as other resources for collective life. They are internalised intersubjectively: they exist “in our heads”, guiding and informing action, speech and understanding (Dahlgren 2001).

I shall not go over the study here, but it will serve as a basic surrounding for the discussion, as it highlights a central methodological issue: Some of the problems involved when working with phenomena such as meaning, opinion, attitudes, etc. - is that you get the information “second hand” - you just really cant plug out an idea or understanding of peoples heads – and you have no direct access to the data (Lewis 1991). You simply have to rely on your methodological framework as well as on your intuition. The methodological approach used in the study involves “intruding” into the respondents’ world - subsequently trying to condense, reconstruct and interpret meaning and belief systems - in relation to democracy, societal power and political action. The analysis must be able to uncover the tacit knowledge involved in relation to political identity, not quite unlike Althusser’s concept of “symptomalistic reading” (Althusser 1969). This thematizes the connection between actual conditions and the subjective experience of the same, cf. Marx’s distinction (Marx & Engels 1992 [1848]) between objective and subjective class (class “an sich”/“für sich”). At least three seminal and basic methodological problems are laid bare here:

1. How do we know what the actual conditions – the “objective” position – are?
2. How do we know that we are locating the actual subjective understanding of the respondent?
3. How do we construct a coherent power image from the data?

Foucault tells us, that power is everywhere (Foucault 1982). His notion of a net of force relations represents an ontology: a specification of basic aspects of sociality (Schatzki 2006). At the level of epistemology the methodological approach in use is constructivist as well as bottom up-oriented. This means, firstly, that it sees reality as being socially constructed. It thereby rejects “essentialist” epistemological understandings of political life, its actors and institutions. Instead, an anti-essential perspective is suggested – giving priority to action and identity construction as the foundation of empirical inquiry. In a constructivist ontology reality is not simply “out there”; instead, it is always under the influence of the “lenses” through which we are forced to view it. As such, reality cannot simply be captured and described in its “reality”. It cannot be recognised without the concepts and understandings that we use when we wish to understand or describe it. If we can’t *know* in an absolute manner the findings must at least be scientifically plausible and the arguments must be convincing. I here sanction the habermasian notion of *communicative validity* (Habermas 1971).

Secondly, the approach is bottom up-oriented, challenging top-down approaches to identity operating on the precondition that there exists a tight correspondence between structural position and identity. Also, analyses are

process-oriented (rather than structural – or actor-voluntarist for that matter). Instead, the approach is founded in the notion of everyday life, citizenship and political identity. This position and approach could be labelled *meso-orientation*. The 29 interview persons in the case study have been selected on the basis of a number of different characteristics as gender, age, occupation, geography, etc., but also on the basis of their capacity to represent certain types or stereotypes, e.g. the traditional worker, the farmer, the unemployed, the pensioner, the political activist, the official, the ICT-innovator, the self-employed entrepreneur, the student, the manager, the professional etc. The respondents have been interviewed individually - the interviews lasted between 1-4 hours.

Mediated vs. practice-based identities and conceptions of power

Identities and everyday cultures incarnate the central features and characteristics of the actors. Not only are they indicative of values, they also express an individual dimension of acknowledgement. The central analytical question in this section is: *From where do people primarily catch or construct perceptions of power?* A central analytical point of departure for the Cultural Studies tradition was the connection between the objective class situation and consciousness, i.e. the subjective understanding of this situation (Bulmer, 1975). Classic studies of workers' images of power (Lockwood 1966, Bulmer 1975) indicate that it is the power situation in relation to ones *immediate surroundings* and employment situation that structures ones perception of wider societal power relations. Society is understood as constituting an aggregated and magnified body of the hierarchy of working life, i.e. as the enterprise "writ large", with the same authoritarian relations and the same level of disempowerment. In terms of a distinction between near/distant power relations, this tradition exclusively picks up on the former. The relevance of this assumption is, however, increasingly questioned today, as factors including the relationship between the media, the public, cultural pluralisation, globalisation etc. are entirely absent in this tradition. Modern society is also marked by a pronounced spatial, temporal and institutional differentiation, and it is necessary to seek influences in the more "*distant*" relations, including globalisation and processes in the media.

According to a number of modern sociologists TV plays a decisive part when it comes to impact on attitudes (Beck 1992). Media presumably plays a central role concerning the formation of political attitudes. The power of the media is, therefore, increasingly seen as a fundamental aspect of modern society, and citizens' experiences of democratic processes are increasingly linked to understandings of mediated political communication – both in relation to political processes of regulation and individuals' understandings and perceptions of society and its problems (Bennett & Entman 2001). Some pay attention to more delicate changes in patterns of political orientation and participation and the growth of "lifestyle politics" (Bennett 1998), which is characterized by an individualized, rather than a collective, engagement, and increased attention to single-issue-policies rather than ideology and overarching political issues. In a Scandinavian setting

Dahlgren and others have argued for serious changes in the political public sphere and the political culture – also hereby stressing changes in the functioning of democracy (Dahlgren 2003).

It is, however, a well-established assumption in sociology that if people are incapable of controlling or coping with the world around them, they will simply reduce it to the dimensions of their immediate surroundings (Castells 1983). Hermeneutics therefore often examine the down-to-earth experiences as a part of the filter and “tool box” used to process and interpret the more distant phenomena including the political system. Late modernity, on the other hand, forces the individual to constantly make decisions, i.e. to act reflexively. This gives rise to a need for ontological certainty and practically grounded knowledge pertaining to everyday life, which Anthony Giddens (1991) refers to as the practical consciousness. Practical consciousness is linked to the rules, routines and strategies that serve as the basis for the constitution of everyday social life in relation to time and space. The term can be drawn upon in relation to abstract systems, e.g. expert systems, which increasingly have an effect on our everyday life. For example, most of us are familiar with the use of a computer, but far fewer understand the fundamental principles of a computers basic functioning.

The practical consciousness - or “practical understanding” - affects the field of identity formation and the field of perceptions of power and it points to a notion of immediateness when accounting for sources of power perceptions. The way it is used in this study, however, this does not mean to constitute some kind of immediate, life form based formation of identity i.e. a kind of *essential* identity or kernel of identity. The “practical understanding” is in this sense also a kind of constructed or mediated understanding. Modern identity formation is – in other words - seen as a process of construction, but it is a process of construction based on experience and with limitations and inertia belonging to it, not an arbitrary one with a free individual choice. However, the formation of political attitudes and awareness can hardly be narrowly understood as an extension of the work sphere, as in the Lockwood-tradition, where almost all aspects of the social are derived from working life. It is hardly possible in studies of contemporary society to assume beforehand that working life fundamentally lays out the structure for our entire life form. There are a number of forms of structure found in modern society that must be assumed to be common for all, regardless of occupation.

We live today, as implied, in a mass media-saturated environment (Gibbins & Reimer 1999). We encounter a “mediated reality” where a vast majority of political activity is conducted with the media in mind, and the public receive the vast majority of their information from media reporting (Bennet & Entman 2001, Lilleker 2006). The mass media remains the key mode for reaching a mass audience thus serving as a factor, which conceivably facilitates or hands over certain political understandings, images and perceptions. In this sense, media cease being “media” in the true sense of the word – that is as the messenger of information and communication from a sender to a receiver. Instead, modern media transform into a kind of means of perception - which independently constructs,

produces and arranges the “reality” which is publicly deliberated and contemplated: Reality is medialised.

An example of a current identity construction in late modernity will be exemplified in the following section via the analysis of long-distance truckdriver, Joergen. The following gives an insight into his worldview and more fundamental ways of structuring understandings. It is building on an everyday life context in the sense-making of society and political life - and also it is blending immeasurability and identity.

Analysis: Joergen, the truckdriver

Joergen is a 43 years old truck driver living in the Danish town of Viborg. To a stunning degree this respondent uses his practical consciousness as the foundation for his construction of images of power. A remarkable and fascinating feature of late modernity is that even though we live in the same society and share the same “objective” reality, we interpret it in entirely different ways. One could say that we construct various matrixes through which we perceive the world around us. The question is then: how are such understandings of society and power formed? For example, what is the nature of the relationship between ones own experiences and the manner in which one understands societal life? We all have stereotypical senses of the order of things in this world. Such stereotypes can be particularly informative, both in terms of the manifest understandings of power and the more latent and shrouded perceptions and means of structuring reality. In the following I will be giving a presentation of the worldview and the more fundamental ways of structuring understandings in the mind of Joergen - thematising the connection between actual conditions and the subjective experience of the same by revealing the tacit knowledge of power, which I call “the hermeneutics of the political self”.

Joergen is divorced and lives alone in an apartment. After finishing school, he became a working boy before joining the military. Following his military training, he started working as a truck driver for a demolition company. He subsequently began working as a haulage contractor together with his brother, the two of them establishing a moving company. The brother later quit, but Joergen continued on his own with export hauling for fifteen years, where he primarily drove between Denmark and Southern Germany. He is now driving a forklift in a large factory. He was initially picked for the study on the basis of being a representative of the typical “tabloid” newspaper reader.

Long-distance trucking represents a lifestyle - not just a job - Joergen explains. The thing about the job that he liked was the dream of being a “free bird” on the road. He usually drove with furniture to Germany. When Joergen was away from home, he lived in his truck, which was furnished with a bunk, coffee machine, refrigerator and stove - “it had everything”. He did not miss a thing, he insists: there was electricity, television and video. “I have always been my own person - kind of different”, he says: “Nobody is going to tell me what to do”. Joergen has a deeply felt need for autonomy and the profession as a trucker serves this view. Therefore, he got a truck and started his own company.

Joergen is a very good example of an identity where the understanding of politics, democracy and power to a large extent is structured by the person's lifeworld and the "immediate". He shows this in his comments of the relationship between politicians and laymen and the question about political authority and public regulation, e.g. the dichotomy between political systems "experts" and life world "experts", which Joergen thematises on the basis of the sociological phenomena of traffic:

Joergen: There's something that drives me crazy - I mean, the politicians have been told by an expert that if speeds are increased by ten kilometres per hour, then "x"-number of people will die. That's just not true, right? I mean - why do those people die? Sure, if something goes wrong for them, then the speed contributes to making the situation worse. If we all drive 0 km/hour, then nobody will die. That's a good beginning, but people will ultimately go crazy. That just can't be right when we are on a four-lane highway, which is fully illuminated and everything is OK and our cars are equipped with the latest ABS things and whatever else you can get. Then you are sitting there and doing 80 km/h, because politicians have figured out that it is the most defensible. That is what we are able to manage. And down on the other side of the line (Germany, ed.), they are driving 180 km/h instead, because they say that they can handle it.

Obviously, Joergen does not simply roll over and subject himself to regulation and management "from above". "I decide how fast I am going to drive on the highway", Joergen says. For the politicians are incompetent, he feels. Perhaps they are listening to expert advice, but Joergen will not acknowledge their expertise. As such, they have no sense of what is actually going on - no idea of the reality on the road. As to politicians getting involved via legislation, he is incited by the dichotomy between those in control and those being controlled, i.e. the vertical dimension between authorities and citizens. Joergen is far from an apathetic or alienated political identity. He has been a member of a political party for all of his adult life - notably various rightwing and liberal parties - preferredly linking his entrepreneurship and petty bourgeoisness to membership of such political parties. His actions, his identity and his understandings are to a large extent based on his consciousness and experiences from the system of "traffic". As an individual motorist, in traffic he is operating in the field of tension between collective rules and individual freedom - between community and autonomy. According to Joergen, the motor vehicle is a symbol of freedom and an image of autonomy - and it represents an open, free space, where one can be oneself. Politics and state (e.g. traffic regulation) are equated with paternalism and judicial "know-all'ism", as unfolded by politicians and technical experts. The automobile thus becomes a metaphor for freedom itself. The real world and the system are locked out and one is free to be oneself. In the car, it is legitimate to think about oneself, demand one's rights or pursue personal interpretations of what constitutes "proper" driving. "I just pay the

fine, if I get caught”, he states. As will become apparent, traffic represents the key word when one is seeking to gain access to Joergen’s wider perception of society and power:

Joergen: The other day - we were driving to work. We have a four-lane road down towards Århus, so I come driving on some guy’s tail, and he pulls out in the passing lane. I know that there are ruts in the slow lane and it is better to drive in the passing lane, but when he can see me coming and that I am going to pass him, then he is obligated to remain in the first lane, regardless of the road conditions. But then he can see me, so he just starts driving faster, because then he is at least able to accelerate away from me. But then I got mad at him, and I said to myself, “He isn’t going to get away from me”, because my car is a little stronger, apparently, so I pull up on his tail, but he stays out there in the passing lane. So, then I thought - hey, I don’t feel like arguing about this with him, so I just passed him on the inside. And that was that.

It would appear as though Joergen displays a certain degree of high-handedness behind the wheel; the traffic concerns Joergen’s own, specific empowerment strategy, but in a more figurative sense, it also serves as a metaphor for societal interaction in general, and power in particular. It is thus decisive for Joergen’s understanding of society and the means by which he constructs understandings of the world around him. This image of traffic is generally suitable for describing more fundamental mechanisms in society and democracy.

To a stunning degree Joergen reveals how the notion of democracy and the paroles of liberty, equality and fraternity from the French revolution is exposed in his magnified reading of the system of traffic, which becomes a true model of democracy. We saw above, how the issue of liberty is amplified in his stressing of individual autonomy. Also, the notion of equality is easily found. On the one hand, motor vehicles represent a source of power. At the same time, they also represent a symbol of “absolute” democracy and complete equality of power. In the traffic, we are all equal. The CEO does not have rights that ordinary people do not. Status and income make no difference. Or as Joergen points out:

Joergen: Handicapped people also become equals when they come whizzing on by. They have specialized cars. And then when they have to get out of their car, they cannot do a thing. But as long as they are sitting in their car, they are on equal terms with everybody else behind the wheel of a car. So that is probably where we are most equal as citizens. We are born equal, and we are equal when we are driving our cars.

One can hardly articulate it any clearer. According to this metaphor, traffic also becomes an image of empowerment: everyone, even the handicapped, can hold their own. At the same time, it becomes an image of an important democratic

principle concerning equality and justice (“fraternity”): in the traffic, we are equal in the formal sense, just as we are also equal before the law in society in general. On the other hand, we are not really equal. Here his image of power is evident. There is also an upper class in this universe: they are the ones driving fancy cars and BMWs, Mercedes etc. At the same time, there is a large middle class, where all of the “solid” vehicles and family cars can be found, and then there is the miserable lower class, where all of the Ladas and “wrecks” are dominant. The people in the BMWs, i.e. the upper class - are capable of driving away from the others. As such, the types and brands of automobiles thus reproduce some of society’s fundamental class distinctions also found in societal division of labour and in status classes:

Joergen: I mean, truck drivers down in Germany - that is the lowest a person can sink. And that is why there are some big conflicts with some of those BMWs and Mercedes. They feel that they are the ones who have paid for the road, so they [the truck drivers, ed.] had better not sit there and set the tempo and bother them.

The traffic, in Joergen’s construction, reveals testimony regarding inequalities and the natural extension of the class struggle. But there is also “good news” from that front; for one can actually break the (class) society determinism: when you are a truck driver, the CEO might well come speeding along in his Mercedes 600, but if you use your indicator and pull out, he can maintain his right all he wants. In other words, Joergen “ontologises” and draws some fundamental societal characteristics from this situation. His conceptions of power thus fit closely together with his own, personal experiences and life situation. Joergen uses traffic as the basis for his description of the world as “every man for himself”. It is about survival, and ultimately we all have to take care of ourselves. The truck drivers represent the “underdogs” and proletariat on the road. They suffer under poor working conditions; they are the ones hauling the biggest load; they are the ones that are making their way the most slowly in the chaotic traffic; and they are generally unwelcome in the traffic. Under these conditions, they join together in a form of community. As such, the conventional power relations can also be turned on their head, and the truck also becomes a concrete symbol of power. For the ultimate power belongs to the truck on the strength of the power derived from its dimensions and raw power - it can flatten all of the other vehicles in the event of a direct confrontation. In a sense, the truck drivers will always ultimately have the power on the road. From time to time, a smouldering class rebellion does indeed flare up: the truck drivers become rebellious. And they know that they are invincible as long as they unite. They have long ago discovered the advantages to be had in solidarity and collective organisation, cf. the “convoy” phenomenon. They are strong individually, but collectively they are untouchable in relation to the others on the road. Occasionally, the long-distance truck drivers gang up against a specific opponent: “Oh yeah. Once we were even four or five guys who got together and locked a guy in, so that he was between the four trucks”, says Joergen. In the situation Joergen refers to,

the trucks surrounded a German BMW on the highway, two in front of it and two behind it:

Joergen: Yeah, we locked him in. I mean - they come along with the pedal to the floor. We can see them from a distance - here comes a guy in a hurry. But on the other hand: we also want to be able to pass once in a while, so we work up a proper head of steam so that we can make a quick and efficient passing. So you are sitting there thinking, "When is it time to go?" and suddenly you say to yourself, "Now!" and you hit your indicator. And then he comes zooming up and he is flashing his high beams and then when he comes up alongside of you, he gives it to you with everything he has got. So then you call out to the guy in front of you, "Try to pull out"! And then you've got him. I can just remember him sitting there, hanging out of the window. He got a chance to cool off a little.

Life on the road can well assume the character of a real "wild west" life. To a certain extent, you make your own rules, and woe is he who dares to challenge the dominant order and its actors.

Joergen: I have also heard about a guy [trucker, ed.], who obviously also pulled out, and then the BMW in question drove in front of him and braked. I have also tried that - you are about to slam into him from behind. So you have to brake, and all of the shit you have in the back gets thrown around. But this guy, he didn't brake - he just kept his foot on the gas and steamrolled over him.

Joergen's example clearly illustrates how power relations can be turned on their head: the CEO is disempowered and must involuntarily subject himself to the force and caprice of the truck drivers, while for Joergen, the situation represents the unavoidable liberation from the determining structures and class distinctions. By no means, however, are the boss-types or the wealthy the only scapegoats in Joergen's traffic-universe. Generally, he simply does not have much good to say about the others on the road: "At one level or the other, it is just as much all the other nitwits out there. When it begins to get a little slippery, there are some people who slow right down. They see ice rinks all over the place. Or else a tractor comes rolling along", Joergen explains. For the ultimate confrontation is when a truck on a relatively narrow road meets a tractor or a different kind of agricultural vehicle:

Joergen: An oncoming combine harvester with everything stretched out over both lanes - I mean, if one of those things comes along, I just stop the truck. Then it is his problem to get around me. If I pull all the way into the side and I have stopped my truck, then if he gets into an accident, it is his responsibility. Those guys have really had some problems getting by. It just can't be right that I have to drive my truck into the ditch.

It appears rather obvious that Joergen protects his autonomy and that he attaches parts of his behaviour and understandings to traffic. But how should we determine the foundations of this identity construction? The role of truck driver in the case of Joergen is not to be understood as an essential identity or a kernel of identity, neither is it as such an “imposed identity”, “pressing” Joergen into certain forms of consciousness, that are useful and supportive of his survival and personal development and existence. Rather, it must be seen as an opportunity or as a central “offer” in the labour of identity formation, which modern and reflexive individuals constantly construct in everyday life through different experiences and processes of identity seeking. Different roles are intertwined in the political horizon of reflection through the diverse fields of opportunity and experience, that are related to the connections and points of exchange between everyday life and political institutions and political publics. Briefly, the ways in which we look upon and understand political life.

This notion is very similar to Althusser’s (1983) concept of *interpellation*. To interpellate is to identify with a particular idea or identity - and more precisely the process by which you recognize yourself as belonging to a particular identity. The specific construction of the truck driver identity must be seen as the individually experienced, contextual and simultaneous interpretation of *both* structure and agency. Not just “one side of the coin”. As Clegg argues:

“The rule guidedness that may be observed by social scientists is not the outcome of structures working on agents, as it is often represented as being. Rule guidedness is the outcome of actors and their practices situated in relation to structures, which in turn are initiated in practices: for example, the Highway Code produces rule-guided outcomes in terms of the semiotic significance of red and green traffic lights for motorists. It is not that red causes an absence of movement and green provokes a presence of movement” (Clegg 2006:173-74).

Rules are always constituted locally by the actors themselves, and in context, rather than being a law-like phenomena, or an objective instantiation of a general principle or law. Contextualism in this sense implies that empirically occurring regularities are always situational, and not the result of either remote laws operating behind the backs of the actors concerned or an ideosyncratic researcher’s interpretation of the scene in question. Understanding is framed within deeply embedded foundations that the actors find normal and acceptable to use. Rationality, in other words, is therefore always implicated with power: “No context stands outside power. If that were the case, then it would exist nowhere, outside understanding, outside possibility, outside sense” (Clegg 2006:174).

Conclusions

I have previously argued for a qualitative methodology and the use of approaches

that are “interpretive” and involve the attempt to discursively grasp the consciousnesses and senses of meaning that identities involve for the human beings who possess them. What is gained from the use of this approach, which a “standard” design would not capture? The case of Joergen – standing alone – is hardly useable for causal theorising. Still, it seems possible to submit some common patterns in relation to power perceptions, identity and empowerment. Joergen is obviously just one example – a single case – but the findings line up with other respondents in the case study showing a theoretical representativity (Riis 2001) and revealing a general pattern: people use their practical consciousness to structure perceptions of power, and as a central building block in the political identity formation. The Power study also revealed nuanced perceptions of power. However, people often tend to conceptualise power as being blurred, systemic and structural. Nevertheless, they apparently do not feel powerless or distant from power. Paradoxically, while experiences of power as “system” are common, the actors appear to be both resourceful and active. Confidence in individual capacity to make a difference seems considerable. There is also generally a positive orientation towards diversity, which might previously have been interpreted in a number of binary oppositions (e.g. between capital and work, black and white, man and woman, etc.; cf. Connolly 1995).

In this chapter I have presented a framework for a “hermeneutics of the political subject” - building on a bottom up methodology and a constructivist ontology. The approach favours the case study for its holistic appreciation, emphasising the importance of context: identity and meaning are linked to the understanding of “meaningful social practices” (Kristensen 1996). It investigates how power is interpreted through “life world lenses”. The participants own narratives are the starting point for the analyses of political identities and the approach pays a certain interest in the meaning, which individuals themselves ascribe to action and behaviour. If you wish to understand what someone is doing - you might probably ask him. He could be lying of course - but you would get access, criteria of distinction and types of categorizations through which he constructs his conscious world. The conversation is the most obvious route into this world. It is guided by the interviewer (Lewis 1991:81). Only interpretation is the entrance to this kind of knowledge, as facts do not speak for themselves. Respondents are the owners of their views and interpretations - you have to acknowledge and validate your findings, and you have to rely on their honesty, as well as your competence to do it well. Studies that take interpretations as their frame of reference are only as ontologically secure as these intersubjective interpretations are stable (Clegg 2006:171).

Certain basic understandings are maintained in this qualitative approach. First, it is explicitly political. This means - at the ontological level - that it understands individuals as guided by political motives, rationalities and interests, which they will defend and act upon. The world is political – and according to our identities, roles and positions, we will defend our interests. This means, e.g. in relation to case studies, that involved actors have certain interests at stake in the

case. These are in general merely and fundamentally different, which is acknowledged and taken as a part of departure. It is also realized that involved parties and respondents may address or reveal momentary laps of “truth” – even without representing the “truth” as such – or that several positions representing different versions of “truth” are at stake simultaneously. It is the task of the researcher to have these versions of “truth” unfolded phenomenologically - in order to have the material analysed hermeneutically and to approach a position from where conclusions can be made on a scientific basis. The most obvious route to enhancement of research quality is to link the designing of the methodological approach closely to the purpose of the study. A valid qualitative study is one that takes into consideration the context of those who are the subject of inquiry and analyses, how phenomena are made meaningful for people. The identities and the life worlds of the individuals involved can, following, not be uncovered in a “top down” manner. This is exactly the condition which renders the concept of contextuality so crucial.

The approach looks for codes of practise - recognizing the mechanisms of power that might be hidden within these practices - and hereby to some extent emulating Ricoeur’s notion of “the hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricoeur 1981). This signifies a method of interpretation which assumes that the literal or surface-level meaning of a text is an effort to conceal the political interests which are served by the text (Gripsrud 2002). It is a critical strategy of interpretation aiming to strip off the concealment, unmasking those interests. It thereby suspects the credibility of the superficial text and explores what is underneath the surface to reveal a more authentic dimension of meaning (Ricoeur 1981).

So, what kind of validity can be attached to the study? In the constructivist methodology the concept of validity is generally not a matter of genuine concern (Hansen 2003). Clearly, this adds to the problems of this approach: We don’t really know. This is, however, after all a basic condition of all scientific methods. A major critique of qualitative approaches is generally the pitiful opportunities to determine that findings are “true” or valid. However, in constructivist approaches, the validity of a study is not determined with reference to certain scientific methods or a study’s replicability, but on how a given interpretation may be judged: Is it thorough, coherent, comprehensive? Does it make sense, or ring true? Is the interpretation provocative and generative of further inquiry? If a study meets these criteria, it may be said to be valid (Clark 1999: 6). At the epistemological level the approach is critical to the notion of scientific “truth”. This is not taken to mean that it is not possible – or important – to check for lies or incorrectness, but rather that “truth” is never revealed for us as human beings – and that we are never in a position from where truth can be disclosed. An anti-essentialist approach distances itself from the classic, objective paradigm of “truth”, which regards recognition as a process in which an investigative subject with value-neutral, scientific instruments uncovers a self-supporting object and its riddles. In this sense, recognition is not a “pure”, clinical process; to the contrary, it is a constant, dialectical and conflicting relationship, and the validity of an interpretation

depends, according to this perspective, on its capacity to convince and acquire status as inter-subjectively plausible within the scientific public (Habermas 1971, Kaare Nielsen 1996).

The production of knowledge is also seen as a social construction of reality (Esmark et al 2005). This notion is in contrast to positivism, where research is valid to the extent that its findings correspond to - or offer access to - an objective social reality. This epistemological dichotomy is also found within qualitative approaches themselves illustrated by the distinction between a constructivist and an essentialist approach. A common way in the qualitative methodology to distinguish between such positions is found in the distinction between giving an interview respondent the status of either *informant* or *representative* (cf. Kvale 1994). In the "traditional" approach of science - valuing objectivity and neutrality - the respondent is understood as an informant (cf. Murphey 1980). Judging validity is here a rather unproblematic course: One could interview the implicated parties of the case and then confront the people involved with the basic facts. From there it is rather easily seen whom are speaking the "truth". In this qualitative approach things are a bit different: The respondents are merely seen as representatives – representing certain beliefs, positions and interests and holding certain rationalities and identities, which need to be unfolded and interpreted in order to draw conclusions. This, on the other hand, makes the issue of validity rather more delicate:

“Assessing qualitative research through a social constructionist lens, however, is premised upon the belief that research findings are always already partial and situated; that they actively construct the social world which is itself an interpretation and in need of interpretation. If we reject the very notion of an empirical world untouched by the social and political, how are we to assess the research claims we make? If we concede that “truth” and “objective knowledge” cannot be invoked unproblematically, upon what grounds are we to say one research claim is better (i.e. valid) than another” (Aguinaldo 2004)?

Constructivists argue that there are many possible interpretations of the same data, all of which are potentially meaningful (Guba & Lincoln 1989). How, then, are we to judge an interpretation as being a valid one? Often in our emphasis on meaning – particularly at the individual and local level – there is a tendency to downplay power relations that privilege certain constructions over others. Constructivists are therefore rightly accused of being idealists with little to say about the material world (Clark 1999). A common critique against constructivist studies coins the risk of relativism – regarding the matter that one interpretation might be as good as any other. This is, however, not necessarily the case: explanations and interpretations may well be judged against each other. And not all contributions are equally valid. Constructivism only claims that it is not possible to “step outside” of interpretations as such – and that every assessment is given within the frames of a given discourse. One can not transcend such frames and provide universal evaluations

and findings. Constructivism does not reject the notion of truth as such – but rather it internalises this matter within certain discourses (Hansen 2003: 348).

Validity is originally a concept derived from – and closely linked to – methodological positivism, although it is certainly not exclusively tied to this position. One problem could be, however, that it also serves a discursive function in the social sciences, and the issue of validity can itself be seen as a *construction of power*. Validity polices the social science enterprise, and thus, to some extent functions as a practice of power through the de/legitimation of social knowledge and research practice (Aguinaldo 2004). The notion of validity should therefore never be treated as a given concept. On the other hand, we decline to abandon the concept of validity altogether. Only by questioning the issue of validity and only by presenting plausible and alternative methodological design, we can contemplate scientific hegemonic positions and expand our knowledge.

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