THE VALUE OF DATA IN ETHNOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

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Abstract

The primary objective of this analysis refers to the question of the value of information, which is an important issue in ethnographic research. The relevance of the study is articulated if one considers that the analysis of ethnographic data from a different cultural context touches the sensitive issue of the creation of truth and the transfer of (scientific) information, facts, and knowledge. This understanding leads to the question who has done the viewing of the facts presented, and to the necessity of an adequate and creative methodological approach, which allows a sensitization, respectfulness, and openness by approaching an 'other' culture and its people. This article is built around theoretical and conceptual frameworks in the field of social science – particularly in the disciplines of adult education, globalization, and development studies as well as colonial studies and postcolonial theory. The research design includes an interdisciplinary literature analysis as well as micro-ethnographic investigations. One focus of this research is that in a time of globalization and postmodernity the model of the 'only truth' increasingly loses its importance and final solutions and clarifications do not provide reliance. As a consequence, one has to acknowledge the plurality in knowledge-production and -transfer.
Key words: *concept of otherness, creation of truth, ethnographic research, postcolonialism and postmodernism, value of data.*

Opening

It can be a tough emotional distressing process to realize and accept that well-known phenomena exist in another culture in a changed allocation, others are missing and unexpected or strange ones emerge. One is challenged to understand that the own values and moral standards do not always apply to the other 'reality' - on the contrary, they even have a negative impact on it. The Western approach to science and its methods consequently push at borders of the negotiability in another cultural context. As an ethnographic researcher, one should therefore disclaim final judgements and point out the inevitable influence of the subjectivity and the culture-centred attitude (Nadig, 1992, p.168). This approach to ethnographic research opens the possibility of creating or recreating spaces for a new challenging complexity and perspective of the investigation, leading to alternative ways of thinking, which contribute to the creation of more peaceful societies which are based on equality and justice. One ambition of this analysis is to break through the Western frame of thinking by going beyond a Western academic analysis and promoting a critical investigation of historical facts and constructed realities.

Methodological Proceedings

The analysis concentrates on the search for an adequate and creative methodological approach to investigate an 'other' culture and its people in a sensitive and respectful way. The investigation is

based on an interdisciplinary literature analysis as well as on experiences of years of micro-ethno-graphic studies in the rural areas of the district Udaipur in the state of Rajasthan in India. The field research in Udaipur included a set of ethnographic investigation methods as, for example, overtly first-hand field observations, expert- and ethnographic-interviews, discussions at different levels of formality, documentation and description through protocols as well as qualitative non-standardized interviews.

Subjective Dimension in Ethnographic Research

Science can be understood not only as the procurement and analysis of data, but as a process of contextualizing cultural, national, ethnical, and social styles. Therefore, cultural difference is never only where one believes to see it, but it is already written into every point of view a person articulates (Egger, 2004, p.194). A researcher is always shaped by the own social situation and thus, it depends on the persistence, the life circumstances, and the attitudes, whether and when a researcher breaks up or deepens the individual investigation or which theories he or she uses or leaves aside. The institutional, personal, and economic aspects, which are important components of each scientific investigation, are for the most part hardly mentioned and scientific work appears mainly as a planned unanimity and determination. This pretended finality of the results consequently supports the idealizations and illusions of the power of science (Nadig, 1992, p.153-154). Bearing this in mind, the subjectivity of the researcher, apart from other techniques, represents a legitimized method in ethnographic study; one could even argue that the results of the research expose just as much from the mentality of the researcher as from that of the examined Other (Podder-Theising, 1995, p.15). The subjective dimension is then the more important the less it is possible to rely on traditional or critical theories of the respective disciplines of science. Besides, the researcher, who is confronted with a set of unknown domains, situations, interrelations and processes, can never approach the Other naturally and with adequate foreknowledge, which often releases defense-mechanisms such as repression, projection, isolation, ethnocentrism, and/or denial. The denial of the 'strange' appearance of 'reality' can lead the researcher to a glorification by idealization and exotization, to a retreat or, in opposite, to moving the rigid structures (Nadig, 1992, p.157-158). The 'openness' with which some researchers try to face the (new) field of research has its methodical limits because if one starts the research completely "impartially", two serious problems emerge: First, it is not possible to keep the 'openness' because one cannot simply switch off the everyday life experiences in new interactions. Moreover, the intuitive knowledge structures are built in such a way that they subconsciously compare each new situation with already well-known situations, which are based on a typologization of one's accessible social world. Secondly, the 'complex new,' or Other, does not represent itself in such a way that one sees through it immediately because also the strange, the Other, possesses own rules and orders. The best option is then to compare the different cultures because one can only purchase the Other if one sets it in relation with the already known (Alheit, 1999/2000, p. 7-8).

Important questions are who has done the viewing of the presented facts, how scientific facts are constructed, what their value is, and if they are objective and accurate. On the basis of the theory that 'facts' are often a product influenced by the dominant class where scientists, but also artists like authors or painters, construct 'reality' after their own needs, values, and experiences, the assumption is that so-called facts do not always symbolize the only 'truth' or 'reality'. Producers of knowledge, who have been for a long time mostly men, have been related to their own cultural, religious, and scientific backgrounds and introduced their own viewing on the 'reality' which has influenced their approaches to the examined subject. Whatever reality is, apart from that it exists, our impression about it develops out of the way in which we talk about or look at it (Geertz, 1997, p.26-27). Concluding, I agree to the German ethnopsychoanalyst Maya Nadig (1992, p.168) who argues that it is necessary to disclaim final judgments and firm truths and to concentrate on the precise description of experiences as well as knowledge- and theory-processes in the 'other' culture and to point out the inevitable influence of the subjectivity and the culture-centred attitude.

Creation of Otherness

Postcolonial theory is built around the concept of Otherness which includes doubleness, both identity and difference. Hence, every 'Other', every 'different than' and 'excluded by', is dialectically created and incorporates the values and meaning of the colonizing culture - yet it rejects its power to define. However, while colonized peoples may be Others in comparison to the colonizers, they are also different from one another and from their own past. The identity of colonized people, who have been mostly constructed as the strange and dangerous Other, is always a changed, a reclaimed hybrid identity and there are complexities and perplexities around the difficulty of conceiving or reconstituting identity. The past can therefore only be reclaimed but never reconstituted, only be revisited and realized in partial, fragmented ways (Lye, 1997). In consequence, as there is not only 'one truth' about the Other, there is also not only 'one memory' of the individual, but many different ones; there is the space of memory where meaning is attributed, which is a kind of disputed space where many voices argue about their right of representation (Egger, 2004, p.170). The mechanisms of repression and projection are then central parts in constructing Others, as for instance the 'Third World as Other,' the 'woman as Other,' the 'Third World woman as Other', and the 'Third World tribal woman as Other' (Arnfred, 2002).

What one notices about the Other has always to do with the own cultural identity. The perception of the Other always implicates the perception of the own culture which is shaped by own social experiences, through specifically sensitized perceptions, or the resistance against certain circumstances (Krasberg, 2000, p.54). The constructions of Otherness which always go along with constructions of the self show that the images of self and Other are closely interlinked and therefore hard to crush (Arnfred, 2002). The Austrian professor for Adult Education, Werner Lenz (1994: 226) argues that the norm of the factual is a dangerous position because it tends to glorify the past and the existing and in consequence, the measure becomes what is generally accepted, and adaptation becomes the standard. It is then only a little step to the statement that what there is, is better than what is possible. This attitude witnesses of boundless self-confidence because, apart from the own existence, hardly anything else is noticed and respected. In order not to feel uncomfortable in this exclusive position, collective protection is constructed, under which it is possible to appear powerful. In such a way, the Europeans felt superior to the natives, the Christians to the disbelievers, or a certain race to another race. But the sample has not completely changed so far: towering above the Others through degrading the Others.

Postcolonialism as an Agonist of Postmodernism

Speaking about the construction of the Other and in this context about the inequality in power relations, postmodernism calls previous guarantors of presence or centers and prior master narratives into question and demystifies power relationships. Besides, postmodernism theory deconstructs values by showing the hidden contradictions by providing new, self-conscious mythologies to replace the old, and by challenging the readers' ontological certainties through mixing the unreal with the real (Hume, 1995). The postmodern project therefore not only denies the concept of a god, but also rejects truth, center, law, science, and any other avatar of divinity and transcendence. Postmodernism and postcolonialism converge in some respective purposes: both reject centralistic requests (Steinig, 1998, p.111), are textual practices, examine the dominant global culture, investigate the idea of control in different settings, bring the 'marginal,' those who have been left out of history, to the 'center,' and explore the idea of authority (Israel, 2000, p.128). Postcolonial studies work explicitly on issues such as hybridity, creolization, mestizaje, in-betweenness, diasporas, mobility, crossovers of ideas, and on identities generated by colonialism. Similar to the political process of decolonization, with which postcolonialism shares a large amount of their arguments, views and motivation, postcolonial studies seek „to identify, valorise, and empower what colonialist discourses label the barbarous, the primitive, the provincial." Postcolonial theory shows that both the metropolis and the colony have been deeply changed through the colonial process and that both of them have been restructured by the decolonization process in different ways (Loomba, 1998, p.19, 173). Thus, postcoloniality potentially disturbs the very foundation of the distinction between West and East by showing their conceptual and political imbrications, while simultaneously subverting the idea of order in the so-called New World Order by acknowledging the continued economic domination by former colonizing countries

(Israel, 2000, p.128). It is in this context, as Ania Loomba, an Indian scientist of literature, (1998p. 51-52) argues, that one should be suspicious of a too easy recuperation of the voice or agency of the colonized peoples or the 'subaltern' subjects because it undermines the devastating effects of colonial power, which was so pervasive that it rewrote intellectual, legal, and cultural systems. Furthermore, the Indian postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak warns the postcolonial critic to homogenize or romanticize the subaltern subject or to make the assumption that native cultures were left intact through colonial rule or that they are easily recoverable. Spivak further shows that the complete absence of women's voices can be read as a particularly fitting symbol of the intermixed violence of colonialism and patriarchy, showing that the combined mechanisms of colonialism and patriarchy made it very difficult for the subalterns to articulate themselves. Spivak, author of "Can the Subaltern Speak?", one of the key-essays in postcolonial theory, challenges the division between colonizers and colonized by inventing the 'brown woman' as a category which is oppressed by both. She points out that the elite native men may possibly have found a way to speak, but the ones further down the hierarchy, especially women, have not had any possibility of self-representation (Loomba, 1998, p.222, 234-235).

While postcolonialism tries to unmask the European authority, postmodernism wants to deconstruct the 'center' of authority in general by rewriting history in favor of those who have been excluded from power, such as women, homosexuals, and other victims of oppression. Accordingly, the European postmodernism and the generally postcolonial have different motives but share similar strategies such as "the move away from realist representation, the refusal of closure, the exposure of the politics of metaphor, the interrogation of forms, the rehabilitation of allegory and the attach on binary structuration of concept and language". The differences between these two are that postmodernism mainly theorizes that language is one vehicle by which authority obtains control while postcolonial writers explore the implications of how language has been manipulated for the purpose of European control. Postcolonial writers use language to deconstruct the dominant European narrative and to reestablish their own narrative and in consequence their own identity and "they are energized by different theoretical assumptions and by vastly different political motivations." Postcolonialism can be seen more as a political movement, whereas postmodernism, in contrast, can be described as a cultural movement. In this sense, postmodernism is "simultaneously or variously a textual practice, a subcultural style or fashion, a definition of western, postindustrial cultures and the emergent or always already dominant global culture" while postcolonialism is "simultaneously or variously a geographical site, an existential condition, a political reality, a textual practice, and the emergent or dominant global culture or counter-culture" (McInnis, 2002). It is in this context that postcoloniality can be described as a global political and economic condition with quite different ramifications for those who are victims of historical oppression. Postcoloniality is therefore not an ally for Western postmodernism, but an agonist from which postmodernism may have something to learn (Israel, 2000, p.128).

Summary

Postcolonial theory is built around the concept of Otherness; but Otherness is never given; instead, it is always constructed and often implemented through education processes (Arnfred, 2002). The understanding that each concept of the Other also describes one's 'own,' is of revolutionary importance for social sciences and specifically for ethnographic research (Nadig, 2000, p.37). It is in this context that it is necessary to concentrate on the diverse perspectives of the so-called consistent "reality", "memory" or "facts" and to realize that at the present time the representation of the 'only truth' increasingly loses its value. The importance of plurality in knowledge-production and -transfer has then to be recognized and a continuous reflection on the difficulty of scientific research in another culture has to be acknowledged by (Western) social scientists. The thrust of the argument in the study is in accordance with Ania Loomba (1998, p.249-252) who claims to move away from the grand narratives, not because the "age of the grand narratives has been left behind on epistemological grounds", but rather that the grand narrative of decolonisation has been adequately told and widely accepted. Thus, smaller narratives which pay attention to local topography are needed nowadays. There should be another way of rethinking the relationship between the local and marginalized and

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the larger structures in which they are imbedded because the narratives of the marginalized colonized can modify the understanding of colonialism, capitalism, and modernity. However, the global narratives do not disappear, but there is a chance to read them differently. The local and the global need, in that case, not to be thought as equally exclusive perspectives, but as aspects of the same reality, which help to reposition each other in more nuanced ways.

Concluding, this article addresses the necessity to transform the problems which emerged through westerncentric scientific thinking, methods and researches, and to develop creative, sensitive, and respectful methodological approaches in (ethnographic) research. As one result, the analysis shows that there is a need for new theoretical concepts, practical strategies and perspectives of researches to open and establish an alternative space of thinking outside that Western (academic) world, which generally created the problems. In ethnographic investigations one should focus on an alternative space to the binary system, as for instance on a postmodern space or third principle, which is a space that attempts to include both sides - West/East, inside/outside, superior/inferior, centre/periphery, men/women, dominant/dissident, and/or religious/secular - and to foreground hybridity over clarity and openness over closure (Hogue, 2002). This approach allows to promote a more complex and critical view on historical facts, on constructions of "truth" or "reality" and it supports to overcome rigid (academic) structures and the influence of unreflected subjectivity and culture-centered attitudes in scientific and especially in ethnographic work.

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