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# Subjectivity in Grounded Theory

## Subjektivitāte pierādījumos balstītajā teorijā

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The article deals with the topic of qualitative research and its focus is on the researcher as a subject and subjectively shaped research process itself. Subjectivity in qualitative research, its all dimensions, research report as a result of an individual or collective effort, shaped by subjective influences: how they influence research process outcomes? What is happening by distancing from self-reflection? Different authors - epistemologists value sequence of “subjectivity” differently. Author leads to the conclusion that subjective influences can only be traced to a limited extent in the research report.

**Key words:** epistemology, subjectivity, Grounded theory.

In empirical research, the research subjects and their environment are initially the focus of interest. Qualitative research should also focus on the researcher as a subject and on the subjectively shaped research process itself.<sup>1</sup> In the following, subjective influences will be reflected theoretically with the aim of determining an attitude of reflexivity for qualitative research.

Franz Breuer has worked extensively on this topic and summarized his research practice in the volume “Reflexive Grounded Theory” (Breuer, 2010). His findings are the basis of the following consideration. Kathy Charmaz has also explored influences of the researcher on the research with her attempt to ground Grounded Theory in social constructivist terms (Charmaz, 2003). Her thoughts show closeness to those of F. Breuer. They will also be drawn upon in the following. Stefanie Klein, in the context of her study of epistemological processes (Klein, 2003, German quotations transl. by N.Hark), shows that the “subjectivity of the researching subject and its references to meaning” (Klein, 2005, 285) are also important for scientific theory formation in practical theology.

In many disciplines and in a popular conception of science, objectivity is strived for. A phenomenon should be observed and described free of external influences. In such research models, researchers are neutral observers whose point of view is completely independent of the observed phenomenon. They should not exert any influ-

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<sup>1</sup> At this point, the epistemological classification of the subjectivity of the researcher can only be done for grounded theory in the context of qualitative research. Although an extension of the discourse to quantitative methods or to the fundamental consideration of all scientific disciplines would be worthwhile, it cannot be done here.

ence on the phenomenon and thus be able to record objective observations. F. Breuer speaks in this context of a “super observer” (Breuer, 2010, 120).<sup>2</sup> In Grounded Theory research such an epistemological model is questioned (Klein, 2003).

For ethnology, Elenore Smith Bowen has captured this problem in an autobiographical novel (Bowen, 1992). In the fifties she conducted field research among the Tiv, an ethnic group in southeastern Nigeria. For this purpose, she had a residential hut built on the edge of a settlement. This privileged location was endowed with many cultural and material resources from E.S. Bowen's homeland. From her research station, she could observe the village. In the hut, she wrote her research diary. Her social contacts with research subjects grew over time. E.S. Bowen made friends, distributed medicines, and took an interest in the problems of the villagers. Eventually she had to stop her observations because she was blamed for a smallpox epidemic. A neutral inquiring observer had become a participant in the field, facing accusations of being a witch who had brought disaster on the Tiv with her witchcraft. E.S. Bowen's pitfall was lack of reflexivity. She could not maintain her “neutral observation”. She provided important and valuable descriptions of Tiv life through her documentation. Moreover, insights about anthropology and women ethnological researchers in the sixties can be gained from her research practice. Finally, she has gained a crucial insight for qualitative research: a neutral or objective position is impossible when the researcher enters into a direct relationship with the research field. This example illustrates that in qualitative research every process of cognition is influenced by the “subjectivity of the researcher”.<sup>3</sup>

It is crucial to note that not only the researched subjects interact under the conditions of their subjectivity, but also the researching person himself. As a cognizing subject, she carries all the features of her subjectivity into the research process. The assumption of an “epistemological zero point” (Muckel, 1996, 63) proves to be an illusion. The historical, biographical, situational and scientific contexts of the researcher are inseparable from her research. For data collection with the help of interviews, for example, it is true that the communication situation demands a subjective engagement of the researcher with his or her interlocutors.

Subjectivity plays a role in almost all dimensions of a research project. A researcher him/herself is always already in a relationship, shaped by him/her, to the topic, to the research question, to the data and their evaluation, to initial working hypotheses, to the relevant literature and to theory building, to name but a few areas. Finally, the research report is the result of an individual or collective effort and is therefore shaped by subjective influences. Breuer highlights four epistemological assumptions about the system- or subject-bound nature of cognition (Breuer, 2003, 2-5). The researcher has a spatial and metaphorical site-boundedness, his cognition occurs from a subjectively bounded dynamic space, all cognition is dependent on the sense-boundedness of his cognition, and cognition is bound to the interactivity between the subject of cognition and the person doing the research.

The subjective influences on the research process also affect its outcome. If an objective “privileged view” is illusory, it follows that instead of just one there must always be “several possible perceptual versions” (Breuer, 1996, 25). The single outcome of the research process is thus always subject to the subjectivity of the research-

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2 There are a number of other terms that denote this circumstance, e.g., “God standpoint”, “absolute observer”, “neutral standpoint”, “objective standpoint”.

3 Another common term is that of “perspectivity”. “We characterize the subject- and location-bound nature of perceptions and representations with the term perspectivity” (Breuer 1996, 24). Partially italicized in the original.

ing person. Another researching person would find a different result, again subjectively shaped. This “subjectivity characteristic” (Breuer et al., 2002)<sup>4</sup> is not only to be presupposed, but demands an appropriate and methodically reflected handling. To disregard the consequence of this circumstance would be naive. If scientific research is about methodically controlled cognition, the question of one's own perspectivity is part of it. Pierre Bourdieu, who has intensively reflected on and criticized the sociological scientific enterprise, emphasizes the importance of reflexivity for research practice. “A scientific practice that refrains from questioning itself does not know, in the proper sense, what it is doing” (Bourdieu, 2013, 270). P. Bourdieu examines in depth the ostensible objectifications of sociological questions and points out their social construction. In order to escape these ostensible objectifications, he proposes procedures of distancing and questioning what seems to be taken for granted. The researcher, as a member of the field, is most likely to succeed in breaking with the “certainties shared by all” (Bourdieu, 2013, 274). If he or she can recognize them as constructions. Scientific communication must therefore be designed in such a way that interlocutors can express themselves unbiased by conceivable imperatives to have to replicate certain certainties, and that the person doing the research is able to understand their statements in their own right and independence. This requires the ability to distance oneself from one's own position and to be critical of one's own research practice.

On the one hand, the researcher is required to be aware that he or she can only conduct subjective research and, as a consequence, to uncover the subjective influences as far as possible, as well as to deal with his or her own perspective in a practical and methodologically reflective manner. These requirements must also be taken into account when narrowing down the field of research and the research question, when obtaining data and when the researcher acts in the research process (Strubing et al., 2018, 89).

The recognition of a subjective but reflective researcher position meets with the resistance of a nomologically objectivist theory of science that takes personal influences as confounding factors or as errors to be eliminated (Breuer, 2003, 6). As a rule, such influences are ignored; at worst, research that acknowledges and takes them into account is dismissed as inferior and unqualified. Such “paternalistic objectivism” (Breuer, 2003, 6) claims freedom from value, leaving unconsidered that a value judgment has itself been made by this maxim of objectivity (Charmaz, 2012, 4).

The recognition that subjective influences cannot be completely ruled out in qualitative research does not imply *carte blanche* for every form of subjective influence. As far as possible, subjective influence should be limited and remaining influences should be integrated into the research through an attitude of reflexivity. A non-reflexive and uninhibited approach to one's own subjectivity would lead to arbitrary and thus worthless results. Reflection of the researcher on his/her subjectivity also does not mean that subjectivity is the most important feature in the research process. But without such reflection, there is a danger that the analysis will fall short.

Already during data collection, it is important to take subjectivity into account. Data themselves are not neutral objects picked up in the field. Data collection takes place in a communicative, situational and non-repeatable process. It is only in this process of interaction between research subject and researcher that data are generated

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<sup>4</sup> This quote is taken from the introduction in two research volumes on reflexivity and subjectivity in research. Both volumes contain theoretical reflections on this topic as well as practical examples from social science research areas (Breuer et al., 2002; Mruck and Breuer, 2003).

by both for the purpose set. What we consider relevant data and how we approach that data influences what we see and hear. Their collection impacts back on the research subject and the researching person. The course, questions and answers in an interview, for example, change both interviewees. In this sense, an interview intervenes in the world of the research subject, at least in such a way that it brings the research question to consciousness as a question of interest. It follows from what has been said that the researcher is also influenced and changed in and through the research process.

Charmaz sees in a variety of different data the chance to be able to recognize one's own prejudices and to discover contradictions to one's own position (Charmaz, 2006, 132). Theoretical sampling can lead to a methodical search for the broadest possible range of relevant data. If this is successful, a saturation of data is created, which makes it easier to take into account data that would otherwise have remained unconsidered due to blind spots in the perception of the person conducting the research. This is why successful sampling also requires reflection on the part of the researcher.

The idea of Grounded Theory lives from the fact that the researcher enters the research field him/herself. With an "open, interested, receptive and respectful-accepting attitude" (Breuer, 2010, 23). It is possible to get very close to the research field. This is where a significant advantage of an interview conversation, conducted in a serious and open interaction, opens up. The personal encounter requires an awareness of one's own entanglement in the research field and makes it clear that one's own concepts, interpretations and concerns cannot be excluded. Nor should they be, but they must be consciously and reflectively entered into the communication. What is required is a "self-aware" view of one's own interaction. Only an analytical distance to the object of research and to the research subjects makes it possible to begin the process of cognition productively.

Talking about the subjectivity of the researcher does not focus on his/her individuality, but on his/her relationship to the research subjects. The subjectivity of the researcher is expressed very concretely on the social, cultural, biographical and also physical level. Their preconceptions, prior knowledge and own values are incorporated into the research process. Subjective impressions, images and moods, for example, are added to interviews. A broad concept of data takes these seriously, analyzes them and uses them to address the research problems. Partially and temporarily, the researcher shares the lifeworld of the research subjects. Thus, during data collection, a shared space emerges that is constructed by the research subject and the researching person, who each have their own particular profile. The scope of this space ranges from being a shared human being to a shared life story. As a partially shared life space, it enables communication, guides it and at the same time restricts the scope of its possibilities. The space constructed specifically for research exists only for the duration of the research interaction and cannot be recreated unchanged. Thus, the repeatability of data collection demanded in other research contexts is excluded in principle. Only similar situations can be produced, whereby all characteristics of subjectivity again play a role in the assessment of similarity.

The quality and characteristics of the encounter with the research subjects is open. A research field is always heterogeneous, and so all variants of the research relationship can occur. The encounter can be characterized by great sympathy and familiarity or by distance and reservations. "Thus, in addition to the 'researcher's fear of the field' [...] there is the field's fear of the researcher" (Dressel and Langreiter, 2003, 10). There can be a (too) large leap of faith. Those who, as a researcher, have a great closeness to the research field do not have to take advantage of this as a matter of course. The appropriation of too much familiarity is countered by irritation when expectations

in one's own field are not fulfilled. For the researcher, it is therefore important to get to the bottom of his or her unconscious prejudices. Preconceptions and their often indirect and unspoken influence on the researcher must be found and analysed. In the process, subjective observations are to be consciously perceived and incorporated into the analysis process. Overall, this results in a subjective data collection and analysis process, the quality of which must be proven by the validity of the results. In phases of reflection and analysis, the researcher has the freedom to observe the data from a distance without the pressure of communication and action. They can reconstruct processes, draw on contrasting experiences and data, and analyze themselves, their own subjectivity, from a distance (Breuer, 2010, 122). This phase is close to "musing" in the abductive process.

Methodological self-distancing is a decisive means of social science research, which can also include the return to the research field and the renewed participation of the researcher in the communication process. This creates an iterative process that in principle does not come to its conclusion, a circle of reflection that has its counterpart in the procedure of grounded theory, whose methodology calls for an alternation between phases of data collection and those of analysis.

The space of the actual data collection is enclosed by a larger space of institutional, social and cultural dependencies. No investigation is free from the expectations of the clients and the people carrying it out. These expectations are often linked to hidden positions, relationships and networks. However, as less open, sometimes even hidden expectations, they can be uncovered and reflected upon as far as possible. On the other hand, it is precisely lifeworld communities that are determined from within by a sense of "we" and that distinguish themselves from other worlds on the outside that can have a strong influence on self-representations.

The process of distancing self-reflection leads to the relativization of one's own point of view. A known field should therefore be made methodologically foreign in a targeted manner (Alheit, 1999, 10). If the researcher does not make his or her own perspective absolute, he or she simultaneously admits that other perspectives on the object of research are also possible. This broadening of the diversity of perspectives is of great value. It prevents one-sidedness and a narrowing of perspectives. The medium-range theory sought in grounded theory is accordingly subject to the reservation of subjective perspectives and thus guards against "overgeneralizations" (Reichertz, 2015, 13).

This insight does not devalue the epistemological content of qualitative research. The indispensable relativity of all knowledge in qualitative research processes must not be seen as a flaw, but as an epistemological opportunity. The researcher's point of view is a necessary starting point of all qualitative research. One's own perspective is not only one that limits the horizon, but also one that opens it up. Without it there is no chance of analysis. It is true that the researcher's point of view influences the result, but at the same time there is no possibility of analysis without a starting point (Hunter et al. 2002, 389). One's own point of view is, so to speak, a key to knowledge.<sup>5</sup> The creative and methodically conscious handling of the subjectivity of the researching person offers chances for gaining knowledge. The decisive factor here is a comprehensive methodological reflection on the concrete circumstances, which uncovers influences, recognizes boundaries, detects blind spots and names prejudices. Such an approach creates an epistemologically productive advantage over research that is sup-

5 "Key to meaning making in qualitative work is an awareness of one's own worldview and perspectives while in dialogue with persons in their natural setting." (Hunter et al., 2002, 389).

posedly uninfluenced by an objectivist point of view. The relativity of the research process can be reflected upon methodologically, and then constructively and creatively incorporated into the epistemological process. Certainly, subjective limitations are an obstacle to the research process. But reflected subjectivity sensitizes, points out obstacles and can motivate to face the limits. When Jo Reichertz states that “subjectivity [...] is a powerful engine” that “provides energy” (Reichertz, 2015, 12), he has in mind an engaged researcher who understands subjectivity as a challenge to conduct analysis in a deeper and more intensive way, critically illuminating himself. In reconstructive social research, researching also means tracking oneself down.

Breuer names a threefold sequence in the process of reflection (Breuer, 2003, 8-9). In a first phase of primal centering, the encounter with the field takes place without reflection. The researcher behaves and communicates in the field directly, without entering the meta-level of reflection. In this primal centering, spontaneity and impartiality have wide scope. In a second phase of decentering, the researcher distances him/herself from the immediate communication situation and adopts an observer's point of view. In this phase, “comparisons between cultures, milieus or life histories must take place” (Schubert, 1996, 20). Thus, the researching person is enabled to critically analyze the primal-centered and subjective pattern of communication. Here, one's own person and relationship to the field are brought into focus. It is helpful to have the support of third parties who, standing outside the concrete event, can support the reflection with their outside view. In the final phase of re-centering, the researcher can go back into the field with the horizon broadened by his or her reflection. The communication event can be changed or influenced in a targeted way. Ideally, this results in a circle in which all three phases are repeatedly revisited. Elsewhere Breuer speaks of “strategies of letting oscillate” (Breuer, 1996, 20, in the original partly in italics) in the attitude of distance and closeness. The researcher repeatedly switches from immediate “engagement” with the field to targeted “reflection in the process of investigation”.

Even if an intensive process of reflection has come about within the research process, the question remains as to its consequences for a research outcome or the research report. The analysis of the researched reality cannot take place in the mode of an independent objectifiable methodology, but only in the sense of a hermeneutic process. With the recognition of subjectivity, first of all, the quality of research is not increased, but its limits are pointed out and “a more realistic assessment of the possibilities and results of research” (Muckel, 1996, 69-70) is achieved. The limitations of the researcher also mark the limitations of the research outcome. While an increased transparency of subjective influences in the research report on the side of objectivist-oriented research can cause incomprehension, possibly even a fundamental devaluation of the results, on the other side there is a deepening of the analysis. The decentered-self-reflexive view can lead to information that would remain unconsidered without it. Nevertheless, subjective influences can only be traced to a limited extent in the research report. Some details of particular importance can hardly be conveyed in a report. This concerns many unconscious influences, such as biographical decisions or decisions preceding the research, or the choice of topic, the placement in the research environment and the relation to the relevant scientific community. Also, characteristics of individual interviews and the respective interview relationship can only be captured fragmentarily in a report.

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### Subjektivitāte pierādījumos balstītajā teorijā

Raksts aplūko kvalitatīvo pētījumu problemātiku, tā centrā ir pētnieks kā subjekts un subjektīvi iekrāsotais pētniecības process kā tāds. Subjektivitāte kvalitatīvajos pētījumos visos aspektos, pētījuma apkopojums kā rezultāts individuālai vai kolektīvai pētniecībai, ko ietekmē subjektivitāte - kā tas ietekmē pētnieciskā darba rezultātus? Kas notiek, distancējoties no subjektīvas refleksijas? Dažādi autori, epistemologi, subjektivitātes mēru vērtē atšķirīgi. Autors secina, ka subjektivitāti pētījumu ziņojumos iespējams konstatēt tikai daļēji.

**Atslēgas vārdi:** epistemoloģija, subjektivitāte, pierādījumos balstītā teorija.



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