LA COMPRENSIÓN DE LO SOCIAL / *UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL*

SOCIOLOGÍA HERMENÉUTICA DEL CONOCIMIENTO

HERMENEUTIC SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

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RESUMEN: Este artículo tiene como objetivo presentar la sociología hermenéutica del conocimiento fuera de la investigación social cualitativa convencional: para delinear sus principios, enfoques y necesidades y sugerir posibles áreas de aplicación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Hermenéutica, sociología del conocimiento, métodos cualitativos, lógica de la investigación, abducción, Conocimiento.

ABSTRACT: This article aims to present hermeneutic sociology of knowledge outside of conventional qualitative social research, so as to outline its principles, approaches and requirements and suggest possible areas of application.

KEYWORDS: Hermeneutic, sociology of knowledge, qualitative methods, Logic of Research, abduction, knowledge.

> The world is a world of meaning
> (Mead, 1983: 347)1

1. DEFINITION AND AIM

Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge is an evolving, complex *theoretical, methodological* and *operational* concept which essentially has its foundations in the work of Hans-Georg Soeffner and has since been developed and differentiated by various researchers including Thomas Eberle, Ronald Hitzler, Anne Honer, Hubert Knoblauch, Michaela Pfadenhauer, Jürgen Raab, Jo Reichertz, Bernt Schnettler and Norbert Schröer. It sets out to (re)construct the social meaning of every form of interaction (linguistic and non-linguistic) and all types of interaction products (art, religion, entertainment, etc.). Initially, the name 'sociological hermeneutics' was often used to refer to this method. Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge has emerged in this form partly out of the criticism of the 'metaphysics of structures' in the objective hermeneutics of Oevermann (cf. Reichertz, 1988), and partly through the debate on the socio-phenomenological research tradition (Schütz, 1972).

This article aims to present hermeneutic sociology of knowledge outside of conventional qualitative social research: to outline its principles, approaches and requirements and suggest possible areas of application. It will not, however, be possible to entirely rework the approach from a marketing perspective.

Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge sees itself theoretically as belonging to sociology of knowledge and operationally/methodologically to *hermeneutic,* data-analysing, *structure-analytical* model-building, qualitative social research. This *theoretical, methodological* and *operational* concept aims to (re)construct the *social* meaning of every form of interaction (linguistic and non-linguistic; face-to-face and institutional) and all types of products of action (art, religion, entertainment, rules and regulations, objects, products, services, organisations, etc.).

Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge does all this not just as part of developing social theory in the long term, but also in order to understand and explain the actions of people and (people in) organisations, which can also be useful for prognosis. Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge is thus aimed as much at the individual case as the type, and at practice as much as theory.

It examines how subjects of action – situated and socialised in historically and socially developed, confirmed routines and interpretations of the given field of action (patterns, types, orders, structures) – on the one hand encounter and (are compelled to) appropriate these routines and interpretations, and on the other constantly lend them new interpretations and thereby (are compelled to) invent them in their own individual way. These independent reinterpretations of given knowledge are in turn fed back (similarly as knowledge) into the social field of action and change it.

From this perspective, the action of these subjects can only be (said to have been) understood if the interpreter is able, on the basis of the collected data (interviews, observations, documents, etc.), to relate it to the given frame of reference relevant to the practice in question and show it in *this* way and for *this* situation to be *one* (for the actors) sense-making (if not always purpose-rational) 'solution'. 2

2. AREAS OF APPLICATION OF HERMENEUTIC SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge has applications above all in (cultural) sociology, education sciences, psychology, and communication sciences. It is increasingly attracting a great deal of interest in *organisational analysis* and qualitative *market research*, primarily because it regards organisations, products and their design and also services as constructed practice (that is, as meaningful action) and action within orders. This action is also always part of internal and external communication and, because it has an effect, can (and must) be interpreted. Here there are various theoretical similarities and points of reference to von Giddens' theory of structuration (Giddens, 1992) and its development by Ortmann (Ortmann, 1984), both of whom figure significantly in the literature of organisational sociology.

Brand profiles, organisations, artefacts, design and service concepts and much more are never just the outwardly visible part of a product alone: they always have a form. And form – this is true for all products made by man – always tells us something about how whatever it encloses is to be understood as a whole. Products, services and organisations mean something (to us) because they have a form. Form, therefore, is always constructed, it is always communication.

Forms mean something. This they have in common with images and language. Certain forms mean certain things in certain contexts. What they mean has been shaped and stratified historically and is anchored in the culture of a society. All competent members of a culture have knowledge of the forms, even though they may not always be able to explain them exactly. They react to meaning without having – and often without being able – to verbalise it.

Qualitative methods are particularly valuable in market research for attempting to understand and explain the 'message' an organisation, product, service or form is communicating in order to assess *in advance* whether the form or product suits and could be accepted by the target group, and whether communication has been carried out properly. To this extent, hermeneutic sociology of knowledge is particularly useful in brand management, both for developing strategy and reviewing its implementation and evaluation.

Another possibility, however, (following the example of cultural studies – cf. Bromley, Göttlich & Winter, 1999) is to find out what happens to an organisation's products and services in communication and interaction, in other words how they are received and used by the consumer, in order to ascertain whether a company's offerings have any results and if so, what they are and what the contributing factors were.

Since the focus of hermeneutic sociology of knowledge is on the analysis of interaction, it is similarly very well suited to the analysis and preparation of sales negotiations, job interviews, business meetings, presentations and management processes.

3. FOUNDATIONS IN SOCIAL THEORY

There is no social constellation that necessarily produces same events or things and sets them on a certain course anywhere in the world. Events, like products and organisations, take a different form wherever and whenever they occur. How events develop and products are created (and appropriated) is always unique, and in order to understand them, it is necessary to trace their development.

History does not proceed in a straight line, one step after the other, but erratically, changing direction as it goes. It develops out of the actions, interpretations, hopes, problems and opportunities of individual and collective actors, who through their actions hope to address or even solve their problems. This also creates a form of social order, albeit an imperfect one containing inaccuracies, contradictions, retractions, errors, self-deceptions and coincidences.

Qualitative social research in the sense of a sociology of knowledge approach to hermeneutics can *trace* and *capture* all of this, it can reconstruct the typical form of something that has become concrete, the pattern or the figure, but it cannot find any sense, rationality or function (for the common good) in it all. History does not unfold, it does not go on reproducing the same structure in action; history and interaction are open to development, they are mutually dependent and permeating processes which from time to time form patterns, but still continue to seek their own course until the next pattern, possibly an entirely different one, emerges.

The fundamental question in the *sociology of knowledge* approach to hermeneutics is captured by Hans-Georg Soeffner in the following words: "Welches Problem wurde aus der Sicht der Akteure wahrgenommen und durch die daran anschließenden gesellschaftlichen Konstruktionen bewältigt, also welche Motive verbanden die Handelnden mit ihrer Selbstzuordnung zu einer Institution, zu einem Verband, zu einer bestimmten Wahrheit?[2]" (Soeffner, 2004, 40). To be able to answer this question, any interpreter taking the sociology of knowledge approach must successively trace the practice of action and of life step by step in order to describe and explain how something came about and why in a certain situation something represented a 'solution' for a certain actor (further details can be found in Reichertz, 2005).

Actions, and from a sociological standpoint this much seems certain, do not join together of their own accord (that is, out of themselves) into one higher-level, overall action. Individual actions do not contain some inherent law that compels further action in a certain order and certain direction from within. Actions must be driven and joined together by actors who seek meaning in their interpretations and decisions. In face-to-face interaction, the participants in the 'here and now' weave a coordinated (and not always, but usually, complete) overall action – such as a conversation, a game of billiards, or a dispute. This interactive weaving process by no means comes out of nowhere: the participants draw on partly conscious, partly tacit knowledge of the historically and socially developed, and often also heavily sanctioned, practices, routines, frameworks, types and rules governing it. To this extent, recollection of the social groundwork (and knowledge of the sanctions) plays a role in every interaction, but the groundwork is necessarily open to variation and revision of recollections on account of the actors' orientation towards meaning.

What is special about how actions are joined together in face-to-face interactions is that the participants remain in the situation of the 'here and now'. When the face-to-face interaction comes to an end, the participants – if they meet again – must pick up on a 'there and then' and constantly reiterate, confirm, reduce or modify what was said in that interaction. Whatever they do, they will have to combine or connect their actions in some way to achieve continuity and identity. Here too, socially developed practices, genres and rules are available for this purpose.

Often, however, other actors (invited or uninvited, with or without power) enter into the actions of the 'here and now': other actors from a 'there' have heard of or observe an action in the 'here and now' and attach their own action to it, become involved or comment on it. Or they expect certain action from certain people in the 'here and soon' or 'there and soon' and shape their own actions according to what they anticipate in the future. For example, a bystander may merely remark on a game of billiards, or he or she may announce an intention to challenge the winner of the present game today or tomorrow. If, or more precisely because, all these actors are aware of each other, and because their actions affect one another, they create chains of actions in time and space.

The number of people who regularly link their actions may vary a great deal, as does the intensity with which they are coordinated or the constancy of the people involved. Couples will belong to the smallest groups, demonstrations or events like the Love Parade to the larger. Some groups will connect their actions in time and space very frequently and repeatedly (e.g. married couples), others only occasionally (e.g. neighbours); others still will only become involved in the actions of others for a specific purpose (demonstrators), on a limited number of occasions (estate agents) or at specific times (churchgoers), and some will be avoided altogether, or at most encountered only once (fight).

If people repeatedly combine their actions or enter (often by contract) into social forms (organisations) in which their actions are repeatedly linked together in a specific and coordinated way, this soon results in more rather than fewer fixed constellations of actors and more rather than fewer binding forms of the tried and tested, and for that environment therefore usual, combination of actions.

4. PREMISES OF HERMENEUTIC SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

This is a *sociology of knowledge* perspective because it examines, this side of constructivism and realism, the big question of how subjects of action – situated and socialised within historically and socially developed routines and interpretations of the given field of action – on the one hand encounter and (are compelled to) appropriate these routines and interpretations, and on the other (are compelled to) reinterpret, and in this way invent, them. These interpretations and routines are available to the members of a field of action in the form of *knowledge*, and new interpretations and routines are similarly fed back as knowledge into the field of action.

Within this perspective, the subjects' action can only be (said to have been) understood if the interpreter is able, on the basis of the collected data (interviews, observations, documents, etc.), to relate it to the given frame of reference relevant to the practice in question and portray it in *this* way for *this* situation as *one* (for the actors) sense-making (if not always purpose-rational) 'solution' to a problem of action.

The term 'problem of action' here quite formally describes the situation whereby human actors must continually shape the course of their action. Even if it is theoretically unclear whether that action just flows

steadily on, 'quantises' or jumps fitfully from (conscious) decision to decision, in each situation the actors must pick one way of acting from all the possible further actions available to them. Usually, they unthinkingly follow traditions, routines or formulas. Sometimes, however, they also follow an inner impulse or are moved in a particular direction by the dynamics of an interaction, and sometimes they make a conscious decision, weighing up the pros and cons and taking the anticipated and hoped-for outcomes, and any unwanted consequences, into account. In such cases they make a conscious – and perhaps even rational – decision. No matter which of these 'solutions' people choose to solve their problem, 'knowledge' will always help to close the gap between possibility and realisation.

In this sense, the role of knowledge is to build a bridge from the 'here' to the 'there'. Knowledge helps people to move from the 'here and now' to the 'there and soon'. Whenever the problem of how to act next arises, and it does so again and again, that is where knowledge comes in.

'Knowledge' in this context is *by no means* to be understood as the correct reflection of an objective and independently existing external reality. All knowledge is rather the result of a specific social construction process. The knowledge that is purely historically valid at any one time is the most important tool (medium) an interaction community has to make its difficult environment 'fitting' and manageable. What is considered 'true' and what counts as 'real' is thus the result of a social process of exchange (Berger/Luckmann, 1977; Soeffner, 1994, 2004). In this regard, knowledge is always more than information (= how something is or behaves); it always bears some relation to people's actions. Knowledge also always tells us what it means for an action in a particular world that a thing is as it is. Knowledge thus always contains a pragmatic component and thereby also *meaning*. Knowing what a certain experience means for me and my actions gives sense to that experience.

This perspective is *hermeneutic* because it aims to (re)construct meaning and because in its method-driven evaluation of collected data it follows the premises of 'sociological hermeneutics' (Soeffner, 2004; Hitzler/Honer, 1997) as emerged out of criticism of the 'metaphysics of structures' in objective hermeneutics (e.g. Oevermann et al., 1979; Reichertz, 1988). At their core, the terms 'sociological hermeneutics' and 'hermeneutic sociology of knowledge' describe the same research perspective (Soeffner, 2004; Soeff-

ner/Hitzler, 1994; Reichertz, 1997; Schröer, 1994 and 1997; Hitzler/Reichertz/Schröer, 1999). In my view, however, the latter is the better term because it puts the (substantive) focus on the direction of the question and provides a method as an attribute.

This perspective is *structure analytical* because the behaviour of the individuals is only considered to have been understood if the interpreter is in a position to relate observed behaviour to the given frame of reference relevant to the type of action in question and in this way show it to be meaningful. Reconstructing action is consequently a matter of making visible the structural, given (stored as knowledge) problems and possibilities of action which, in developing the 'egological perspective', can be attributed to the protagonist *for good reason*. In other words, a veiled intentionalist theory of action is exactly what it is not about.

To be more precise and address any potential misunderstandings, the central point is naturally *not* reconstruction of the *singular perspective known* to the actors in question, as this would be destined to fail from the beginning. The focus is much rather on rational construction of the perspective actors are compelled to take in order to deal with (a) a given task and (b) unavoidable underlying conditions in a given society. The aim is thus the rational construction of *types* of egological perspective (Schütz, 1972; Soeffner, 1980).

Or to put it another way, it is concerned with (1) reconstruction of the structural problems individuals must overcome when acting within a certain framework (irrespective of whether they know of these problems), and (2) reconstruction of the possibilities for action opened up by this particular structure (and those which are not immediately apparent) as a 'solution' to these problems.

To reiterate (and address a very popular objection to hermeneutic research): understanding and explaining events does not rely on presuppositions which believe that the causes of the events we are trying to understand lie in the special features or peculiarities of certain actors. Exhaustion, conflicts in relationships, emotional outbursts, psychological problems, even the weather and other adversities may ultimately determine an action, yet such 'explanations' are not only of little use to sociologists in understanding and explaining the past. At most they may be useful for storytellers.

The findings of hermeneutic studies can indeed be generalised, abstracted and (depending on the re-search interest) even used to flesh out a social theory or a theory of society, and an attempt can be made to use both in understanding, explaining and possibly even averting current and similar processes. What is *not possible* is to identify a specific mechanism that necessarily produces a specific event, or to develop a theory which states that under certain circumstances a particular event must always occur.

Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge is not about identifying subjective meaning in the sense of subjective idiosyncrasies, but always about typical patterns of social action that have emerged in a typical manner in specific societies with a specific culture. These patterns form the horizon for new and subsequent appropriations by actors. They can be reproduced by the actors, but they can also be modified. These patterns of social action are captured and handed down through experiences, stories, texts, laws and sometimes also in buildings.

That is why any sociology of knowledge analysis (even if the *starting point* is always individual action) must also look at the history (discourses) and its appropriation. Social action always refers to these discourses and is also fuelled by them. The actors do not act without reason, even though their action may not always be rational. Action is only very rarely based on a well thought-out plan. It is also rarely 'rational' (in the usual sense of the word), unless, of course, 'rational' is taken to mean anything scientists can find a reason for. This, however, is ultimately only a "didaktisch gut brauchbares Beispiel für die Fallen der Erschleichung empirischer Hypothesen durch eine bloße definitorische Festlegung" (Esser, 1994: 172)[2].

Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge always begins with the individual case and identifies what makes it different, its special features, from other cases. If scientists make broad generalisations without knowing about the distinctions between cases and events that make a difference, they are often saying more than they can actually answer for. One of the aims of science is undoubtedly *also* to reach general conclusions; it is important not to get caught up in the peculiarities and instead use them to develop the general, the theory.

This is precisely what hermeneutic sociology of knowledge sets out to do and does: its central concern is with the connecting pattern, the pattern that makes things comprehensible, that explains. It does not, as some critics claim and (apparently) also fear, generally avoid explaining social events. Nevertheless,

within this type of research, it is true that 'explaining' can no longer be associated with simple determinism, but with probabilities.

However, this can be attributed to the special nature of the object of sociology of knowledge research: this object (= meaningful human action) does not only react to the practice of the actors because they interpret the past and shape their actions according to it; the actors themselves also react very sensitively to interpretations of their actions, e.g. in science and academia. The more scientists address the public in their publications and the easier public access to scientific findings becomes, the easier and more effectively science disturbs and alters the object of its investigations. In this way, the sciences play a role in shaping their subject. While this knowledge in itself is not particularly new, it is surprising that we need to be reminded of it.

5. STRATEGIES OF EMPIRICAL PROCEDURE

Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge bases its findings on empirical research. It examines all forms of social interaction and all types of cultural event. Systematic 'discovery' of the new is a particular focus, and various provisions relating to method are designed to facilitate the process.

For instance, in the first research phase, researchers should work on developing an 'abductive attitude' (Reichertz, 1991, 2003). This means that they must conduct their research in such a way that 'old' beliefs are seriously called into question and 'new', more viable beliefs may be developed. However, this 'programme' can only be put into practice in a meaningful way if it is not a foregone conclusion that the collected data will simply reinforce established beliefs. The data must be able to stand up to this test.

The most resistant types of collected data in my opinion are *non-standardised*, for example audiovisual recordings and taped reports (Reichertz, 2003). Since such data are not produced by the subjects of an interaction in response to the/a research question, and data collection itself is not informed by subjective perception schemata, there is a very good chance that they will not be immediately accounted for by the stored beliefs.

If it is not possible or viable to gather non-standardised data, researchers must produce their own by drawing up observation protocols and conducting interviews. In doing so, they are well advised to work according to scientifically binding standards so that the data they produce also share the same (scientific) standard.

The following two principles of data collection are important to bear in mind: (1) researchers should go out into the field to collect data as *naively* as possible (*only*!) in relation to the subject of investigation (Hitzler, 1991). (2) Precisely at the beginning of the process, data collection should be as *unstructured* as possible. This is because early analytical and theoretical treatment of the material and subsequent data collection at the initial stage would prematurely take the edge off the data on which theories are subsequently to be proved and honed. If researchers actively follow these two principles in collecting standardised data, there is at least structurally a possibility that the data will get them thinking and prompt them to question their 'old' beliefs (Reichertz, 1997).

6. THE LOGIC OF RESEARCH

Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge uses the following method: during the initial stage, the data protocol is 'openly coded' (Strauss, 1994), which means that the document in question is analysed sequentially, extensively and precisely, line by line or even word by word. It is critical in this phase that no (already familiar) interpretation is applied to the text, but that the text is used to construct as many text-compatible interpretations, or readings, as possible. This type of interpretation compels interpreters to repeatedly break down both the data and their own (theoretical pre)conceptions – which creates a good climate for discovering new readings of the text.

If in the 'open coding' phase researchers are looking for units of meaning (which naturally always already contain theoretical concepts and/or play with and refer to them), the second stage of interpretation involves the search for higher aggregated units of meaning and concepts which connect the sub-units. Now is also the time to justify why which (new) data should be collected again or more accurately. The third step thus involves drawing up new data protocols, albeit in a more targeted manner. In this way, interpretation controls data collection, but at the same time, and much more importantly, the interpretation is falsified, modified and expanded by the subsequently collected data.

The process reaches its conclusion when a highly aggregated concept, a 'figure of meaning' has been found or constructed that brings together *all* the investigated elements into a meaningful whole and

makes this whole comprehensible (meaningful) within the framework of a specific interaction community. The question of whether the meaning acquired in this way actually corresponds to the 'reality in the text' is redundant, since sociology of knowledge research is always and only concerned with '*social* reality' (for examples see Soeffner, 1992).

7. CURRENT SITUATION IN HERMENEUTIC SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

Hermeneutic sociology of knowledge is currently taught and practised primarily at German-speaking universities (Konstanz, Berlin, Dortmund, Essen, Bayreuth, St. Gallen, Switzerland, Vienna, Austria), yet there is still no concrete hermeneutic sociology of knowledge 'school'. It is more a way of thinking and researching than a fixed method. Nevertheless, it is a research strategy a series of German, Swiss and Austrian researchers from different sociological disciplines explicitly rely on in their work. To date there has been no 'official' introduction to method in the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge, although Soeffner

(2004a, 2006) and Soeffner & Hitzler (1994) are considered fundamental to the subject. Schröer (1994) also presents and discusses the (certainly not yet harmonised) methods and procedure, while Hitzler, Reichertz & Schröer (1999) primarily consider the theory and methodology.

The first *systematic* description of hermeneutic sociology of knowledge is supplied by Reichertz & Schröer (1994), Reichertz (1997 and 2009), Schröer (1997), Knoblauch (2005) and Kurt (2004), while Honer (2011), Reichertz (1991 and 2000), Reichertz et al. (2010), Reichertz & Englert (2010), Knoblauch (1995) and Schröer (1992, 2002 and 2009) also present methodologically founded research programmes. The cornerstone of 'sociology of knowledge discourse research' is laid in Keller (2005). Discussion and differentiation of hermeneutic sociology of knowledge also take place in Sutter (1997), Keller et al. (2005) and Tänzler, Knoblauch & Soeffner (2006) and Raab (2008). A discussion of the premises of hermeneutic sociology of knowledge can be found in Soeffner (2004b).

NOTES

1   Translation: "What problem was perceived by the actors and overcome by the ensuing social constructions; in other words, what motivated the actors to attach themselves to an institution, an association, to a certain truth?".

2   Translation: "didactically useful example of the pitfalls of the subreption of empirical hypotheses by a mere definition".

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