Dealing with Dilemmas of Difference - Ethical and Psychological Considerations of "Othering" and "Peer Dialogues" in the Research Encounter

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Abstract

In this paper we review two qualitative interview studies, in which dilemmas of difference played a decisive role. With regard to the first study, which focused on the influence of migration backgrounds in student's perception of Holocaust Education in Germany, we discuss several research decisions that were made to avoid methodological othering. Concerning a study on HIV risk behavior of gay and bisexual men, psychological challenges of a participatory approach that involved peer interviewers are outlined. We argue that strategies of recognition of the "other" - seen as a reflexive agent - have to be developed systematically as an ethical precondition of socially responsible research.

Keywords: Stigma, othering, participatory research, research ethics, psychology, reflexivity

Introduction

In research that deals with experiences of difference (such as race, class, gender or social stigma) a qualitative approach is usually considered as the adequate methodological choice. However, any such research either runs the risk of reproducing the very differences it is interested in by its own research design (Badawia et al. 2003) or of fearfully avoiding othering and essentialist ascriptions and thus underestimating both experiences of "being different" and of "being seen as different". This phenomenon is commonly acknowledged as "dilemma of difference" and several of these dilemmas have so far been critically addressed in the context of a politics of recognition (Benhabib 1996, Taylor 1994) or intercultural pedagogy (Kiesel 1996). As for any dilemma, there cannot be a best research practice that may claim to solve it. The only way to do justice to this dilemma seems to be "reflexivity" – a research attitude rather than a methodological tool, which seems increasingly appreciated in qualitative methodology (Guillemin & Gillam

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2004; Mruck & Breuer 2003; Breuer et al. 2002; Finlay 2002; Macbeth 2001). Researchers claiming reflexivity try to be as transparent as possible about how they are part of the process of knowledge production, which is then seen as a joint production of meaning (instead of a one-way self-revelation; see Atkinson and Silverman 1997).

But reflexivity should not be seen as a virtue or ability of researchers only. Members of socially marginalized groups that share experiences of discrimination and living with stigma often may even be more aware than others of how knowledge production and power are entangled. Being subjected to discriminating and symbolically excluding discourses in society, they implicitly know that research meant to learn more about them influences and may (even unintentionally) fuel these discourses. As research subjects they are not just informants, but develop their own interpretation of the research project that may include the intention to cautiously choose, which information they are willing to provide. Yet, the power to control the *signifiè* is limited. In this perspective statements made by the interviewee can be interpreted as sometimes conscious, often subconscious, communicative reactions to something the interviewer has conveyed or to the wider public discourse that one tries to affirm or resist. Although most qualitative researchers would agree with the argument that interaction dynamics play a decisive role in co-constructing meaning in the interview situation, the far-reaching ethical implications of this perspective often remain underestimated.

What consequences do these considerations have for developing and conducting research projects? In our paper, we want to revisit two previous research projects in which the awareness of stigma, difference, and powerful public discourses played an important role. Both projects were conducted in an interpretative paradigm with strong (self-) reflexive claims. By re-examining the methodological and ethical challenges of dealing with "difference" in these projects we aim at showing the benefits but also the limits of our approaches. We hope that this can contribute to a deeper understanding of the vicissitudes of researching difference and stigma in general.

"We want to talk to you because you are different": Collective memories in an immigrant society

The first study aimed at exploring current challenges in teaching National Socialism and the Holocaust in Germany. One of the central research questions was, whether "globalized classrooms" make a difference in teaching this sensitive subject. The study was designed by an interdisciplinary working group of social psychologists, sociologists, and historians based at the Psychology Department at Munich University. In contrast to observation studies we focused on subjective, retrospective interpretations of how teaching is experienced and remembered both by students and teachers. Thus, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 48 students and 12 teachers in 14 secondary schools of different types in different metropolitan

areas, smaller cities and towns as well as rural areas. In this following we will discuss how the supposed "otherness" of interviewed immigrant students was addressed throughout the study by critically reflecting on certain methodological decisions.

First stage: Questioning the research questions

The problem of othering was visible from the very beginning. Our research team was charged with the realization of the study by the "Task Force on International Co-Operation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research", a regular working group of the European Union that was founded after the Stockholm Conference about the future of Holocaust memory in 2001. The group's interest in the study reflected an increasing concern of the representatives about how to teach about National Socialism and the Holocaust in multicultural contexts. They referred to dramatic narratives of teachers who feared to address the topic because of "Arab students", especially male Muslim adolescents who were said to be reluctant against the topic. These reports reminded us of a typical anti-Islamic stereotype in which "the Muslims" are discursively constructed as endangering "our" western progressive achievements – such as "our" elaborated ways of dealing with "our" difficult past(s). The underlying hypothesis of the study that immigrant students were compromising Holocaust Education turned out to be one of the main challenges of the study. There was a strong seduction of actively looking for Muslim male students, finding out and showing what they "really" think and feel.

If we look back and evaluate this first stage of our research we see a group of researchers unified by a self-identification as "sensitive Germans" with a strong commitment towards the topic of Holocaust memory. This commitment and the need to prove our sensitivity to each other - and perhaps also to the implicit international audience - prevented us from investing more time in actively examining the research questions and the interpretations that were presented. We were of course aware of the danger of simply reproducing social phenomena, thus it soon became clear, that we would not simply ask immigrant students or Muslim students. But we did not take the time to really question the hypotheses we were confronted with and to exchange our interpretations of them. From a psychological standpoint, focusing on heterogeneity "outside" led to hide the differences "inside" the research team. Retrospectively it is remarkable how much we talked about examining differences and at the same time seemed to have forgotten all the other differences in gender, sexual orientation, generation and even migration backgrounds present in the research team and the respective differences in priorities and perspectives. The main lesson to be learned from this is that we should have invested more time to critically asses the research question as a first stage of research itself.

Second Stage: Explorative investigations

When we started collecting data, we decided that we should emphasize the explorative character of the study. Thus we did not specifically look for immigrant students at this stage but to remain "open" and describe whatever phenomena would turn up. Interviewers went to school classes, presented the idea of the study and the students themselves could decide, if they wanted to be interviewed.

So our strategy at this point was to try to remain as open as possible, although the idea of an "innocent" researcher or a naïve object of investigation is of course a chimera, as pointed out above. Interestingly, at this stage of collecting data, immigrant students were underrepresented, especially the male Muslim adolescents. We understood this as an active choice and as a possible effect of the stereotyping they may have been feared. This interpretation was implicitly supported by the data analysis: There were many stereotypes about "Turks", some of them brought forward in a dramatically stigmatizing manner, for example in a teacher's statement saying "I don´t know if Turks do think at all". By doing closer analysis we realized, that the statements about what others think or do not think, did not only refer to immigrants or Turks, but to all kind of "others", like "other classes" who were said to have behaved stupidly at a memorial site. Many of them could be reconstructed as projective tendencies. Thus we interpreted that reporting about the thoughts and behavior of others seems to have an important psychological function in this field.

Third Stage: Looking for Immigration Experiences

In another stage of collecting data, we decided to address "immigration" more directly, but still avoid "othering" in the process of investigation. In the same manner as before, interviewers were sent to special classes for immigrant students. In these so-called "integration classes" the students had come to Germany two or three years ago, between the age of ten and fourteen. They were able to compare German memory culture to memory cultures they had been confronted with in their countries of birth. Methodological othering was thus avoided by choosing students who could actively compare experiences in different contexts: "Well", as one student calmly stated, "in Russia they emphasized that we were the good ones and here in Germany they are talking about the suffering of German civilians."

Lessons learned

Looking back, our design, firstly, helped us to reconstruct the function of "othering" in the context of dealing with emotionally difficult collective memories. The integration classes turned out to be a good compromise, which enabled us to address a possible effect of immigration without falling into the traps of methodological othering. As illustrated above, these students did indeed spontaneously compare their different experiences with collective

memories. Thus they could really talk about differences and were not just ascribed some otherness. Yet, as a research team we avoided a direct confrontation with the hotter ethical question of how to deal with the strong stereotype of the "ignorant or aggressive Muslim". We pretended to be more open than we were. In a way we fell back behind our own awareness that both, the researcher and the subject of research, at least intuitively know that such research is enmeshed in political discourse and may later feed public debate. Retrospectively, we think most of the immigrant students understood that we were interested in immigrants´ perspectives. Here again, the important point is: We did not ask them - and thus, we do not really know. In the conclusions we will consequently propose to integrate such questions in the research process.

Secondly, the problems we faced can also be seen as typical on research about "migration and memory" (see Kuehner in press). In this context, one interesting path in avoiding essentialism is to replace the idea of researching qualities or practices of certain persons (e.g. by seeing memory as a property) by the idea of researching spaces or places. In this sense one would be interested in interviewees who can tell something about social practices at certain places rather than in exploring how they are like as "different persons". From this perspective our approach was an attempt to choose a place where "multicultural memories" may be relevant – yet this shift of perspective, again, could and should be made more explicit.

"I want to talk to you because I am the same": Sexual risk behaviour of HIV-positive gay men

Against the background of rising HIV diagnoses in Germany since 2001, the study "Positive Desire" aimed at examining the psychosocial dynamics of sexual risk behaviour among gay men (Langer 2009). The special interest in this group reflects the significance of homosexual ways of transmission in the current epidemic. For this purpose it was envisaged to conduct in-depth interviews with HIV-positive gay men to identify the reasons for HIV-related risk behaviour.

Peer dialogues

The field of HIV/AIDS is commonly seen as highly sensitive, as it is still determined by issues of personal shame and guilt as well as social stigma and discrimination. Any research that asks about "reasons" for behaving risky in terms of HIV transmission – especially with regard to gay men that were stigmatized targets of public discourse from the very beginning of the epidemic – runs the risk of re-stigmatization (Tomso 2009). The study was therefore designed in the tradition of community-based participatory research to responsibly deal with these challenges: The team consisted of HIV-positive and homosexual researchers of different disciplines, community organizations were involved in the design of the study and the process

of research. Furthermore, the interviewees were accosted by an HIV-positive gay "peer" as interviewer, using an active interview approach (Holstein & Gubrium 2004) that includes a personal openness of the interviewer about his own story with HIV/AIDS.

The peer approach worked out better than expected. The number of responses to the study notification in community magazines, web forums, and HIV centres exceeded the interview resources by far. Referring to Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998), 58 interviews were finally carried out from November 2006 to July 2007. The sample implied a wide range of participants aged 19-72 years, with different socio-economic backgrounds. 17.2% of the interviewees had migration experience.

Beyond its effects on the field access this approach implicated a far-reaching confidence and openness towards the peer interviewer who was perceived to share the same life experiences of being gay and HIV-infected. After the interview some participants reported to have told things e.g. about the infection situation and traumatic life events they had intended not to tell when they first decided to participate in the study. In this respect the reflection of the research process indicates at the importance of the topic of "the limit". Insofar as HIV can be understood as a transgression of limits (of the bodily integrity, of a safer sex norm, of individual responsibility for health), in the interview it seemed to be important for these interviewees to have the power to fix at least the limits of communication about it. The peer approach, however, suspended their intention, so they crossed the line of personal story they had drawn for themselves.

Interestingly, the peer situation in the interview produced the opposite effect in the study as well. The perception of the (desired) "other" as the (desirable) "same" led to affirmative in-group talks in some of the interviews in which established community discourses marked the limit of communication so that "one's own story" could only be told within this given frame. The reference to (assumed) same experiences of being a HIV-positive gay man by the interviewee as well as the interviewer covered up other differences of class, ethnicity, and age. In these interviews narrations dealing with experiences of stigmatization, discrimination, and violence due to migration backgrounds were difficult to develop as soon as a common ground of sexual life experiences was co-founded in the interview. This observation is of particular interest in the context of current intersectionality debates because the interpretation process called attention to the health vulnerability dynamics driven by these multiple experiences.

Methodological decisions

Hence, the peer approach not only presented great opportunities for the research encounter but also posed great challenges for the research process. How should we deal with the sensitive data that was originally shared in an intimate situation with the HIV-positive positioned peer? What does it mean for the selection of appropriate interpretation methods? Where shall

we stop the participation in this participatory approach? Did we not exploit the fantasies of being peers? To what extent is it possible or desirable to reproduce "difference" in this phantasmatic situation of "sameness"?

Three main decisions were made in order to meet with the implications of the peer approach. Firstly, from the very beginning of the interview process a psychological team-supervision was chosen to critically reflect upon the interaction dynamics driven by the peer encounter. It helped to understand the appearance of in-group talks that seemed to be strange to the topic, but nevertheless shed light on sexual decision-making processes. That, secondly, led to an adjustment of methods used for the interpretation. It was necessary to shift the focus of analysis from narrated past experiences of risk behaviour to current interaction dynamics in the interviews which was reflected in the importance of discourse analysis of occurring peer dialogues and their function for the interview. Finally, by appointing a scientific board that included community organizations and people living with HIV/AIDS a way of representative participation has been tried to achieve. In this sense the board used to act for the interests of the participants and critically control the ethical implications of the research.

Lessons learned

Reviewing this HIV study we understand peer interviewing as a powerful way to do research in sensitive fields. However, we would argue that participation should not be stopped or delegated at a certain point as we did after the interviewing. If one takes the participatory approach serious, an integration of the interviewees in the entire research process is constitutive. A (self) positioning of peer interviewers as "the same" (and thus as representatives of "the other") does not solve the dilemma of difference. Instead we would like to follow Frisina's (2006) discussion of the backtalk focus group as a method for a participatory interpretation of data and add the suggestion to involve interested interviewees even in the presentation of the results of a study. In this sense the peer dialogues that were established in the interviews can be continued in the publication as form of a dialogic writing in which the dilemma of difference between the "same" and the "other" appears as a peer co-construction of meaning.

The implications of the peer approach for the interaction dynamics and the production of data should not be seen as biases, but as research resources, wherever a reflexive analysis of the data and knowledge production in the study can methodologically be linked to the research interest. The argument is based on the assumption that in the interaction dynamics the issue at stake is displayed (Jensen & Welzer 2003). The described peer approach of course requires a far-reaching and sometimes painful reflection of one's own position as an highly involved actor in the interviews, an awareness of the "otherness" of the interviewed peer, and a handing-over of interpretation power to the "other" that we address as the "same" (see also Ganga & Scott 2006).

Towards a recognition of the researched subject as reflexive agent

The studies reviewed in this paper showed that there is no simple answer to the questions of how to deal with the dilemmas of difference that are decisive in research dealing with discourses of "otherness". In the first study a more diverse research team may have made it possible to address heterogeneity "inside" the team earlier and may have contributed to a different, more power-sensitive design and to include female heterosexual interviewers in the HIV study could have broken-up the in-group discourses. Both decisions, however, would have had new and different methodological implications to be taken into account.

In qualitative research a strong desire to bridge the gap of difference seems to be inscribed. Therefore it is noteworthy that the methodological construction of differences is constitutive for any knowledge production. Dilemmas of difference thus have to be addressed from the very beginning of a research project to prevent, psychologically speaking, the temptations of a non-reflected identification with the "other" on the one hand or of projective othering on the other. This implies to create an atmosphere of careful reflection from the first research team meetings. If one follows Devereux (1967) any research in the humanities is associated with fear of what one might find out - and could therefore start with an exchange of different fears inside the research team.

Yet, as already said above, the researchers are not the only ones who are able to reflect. Indeed it is imperative to take the researched subject of desire serious as a reflexive agent that is (more or less consciously) aware of possible social and political consequences or instrumentalizations of research. To put this into practice the interviewee has to be addressed much more explicitly as someone who does not only give information (or even authentic self-revelations), but as someone who has his or her own thoughts and interpretations about the research process. This can be done on two levels. Firstly, we propose to systematically use and enlarge what some qualitative interviewers already do - to ask the interviewee throughout her or his perception of the interview and research encounter: Was it "like expected", how was the researcher perceived, does the interviewee fear he or she has said something that will be misunderstood or over-interpreted, what recommendations would he or she give for further interviews? Secondly, we propose to devote one passage of the research encounter to talk about the project on a meta-level. In the HIV study a common discussion with the interviewee about the chances and pitfalls of such a study in general would have been fruitful. In the study on Holocaust Education we could have asked the pupils in the integration classes about their assumptions, why we came to their class and their thoughts about the project.

In the end, this text on dilemmas of difference has to finish with pointing out just another dilemma: By presenting these problems in the context of "methodological issues in migration research" we presume that they are of

special relevance in the field of migration. On the one hand considering the outlined discourses, which construct the immigrant as the prototypical "other", we are right to do so. On the other hand this argument can also be misleading and may even be just another, more refined, way of "othering", especially if it suggests that this problem is an additional methodological challenge in migration research.

Yet, we think that the two studies presented here do not only point at additional methodological challenges of research around difference and stigma. Rather these projects forced us to become more sensitive about problems, tensions – or perhaps dilemmas – inherent in the paradigm of subject-related qualitative research. Any interviewee should be recognized as "the other" without being othered. This means that we should always treat the researched subject as someone who can reflect and perhaps has reflected about all these implications too - we may not be the only ones who have read "our" Foucault.

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