

Objective Hermeneutic: Methodological Reflections on Social Structures in Women's Lives

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The purpose of this article is to offer insights into a feminist research project¹ and to present the methodological reflections within this project. Foremost, the subject and aim of the study are introduced. Some experiences with the qualitative method of objective hermeneutics (*Objektive Hermeneutik*) are described; why this method was selected for this investigation and how the methodology was modified within the research process. The article focuses predominantly on the modified understanding of social structures. In brief, poststructural positions were followed and therefore the original positions of Ulrich Oevermann, the founder of *Objektive Hermeneutik* were broadened. Finally some empirical findings about social structures in women's lives are reviewed.

SUBJECT AND AIM OF THE STUDY

The main concern of the study is general and non-vocational adult education. The current situation of adult education in Austria is that lessons and programs offered by adult education often are only oriented on consumer and economic needs, which is criticised by the research group. There is little empirical and theoretical foundation and due to this lacking, the research group saw the necessity of this qualitative study. Mainly women participate in courses of general and non-vocational adult education and therefore we focused on women.²

The thesis is that women are affected differently by the processes of reflexive modernization than men. Women are much more challenged to adapt their biographical patterns and their common acting (Oechsle, 2000). Within the "double socialisation" (Becker-Schmidt, 1987), women are still responsible for work within the sphere of reproduction, but they are increasingly in charge within the production-sphere too. In their lives they have to connect things, which are structurally disconnected, e.g. they have to cope with a different set of *patterns of time*, as family members and job-related issues. The question of interest here is which kind of problems or crisis bar women from acting satisfactorily in their lives (subdivided in a biographical and a workday perspective). The aim of the study is to examine the structural dimension of women

¹ From 2002 to 2005 an interdisciplinary group of eight scientists (*AG feministische Bildungsarbeit* Wien Salzburg), mainly pedagogues, worked together on this feminist study, which was published in 2005 under the title *Feministische Bildungsarbeit. Leben und Lernen zwischen Wunsch und Wirklichkeit* (Christof, et.al, 2005).

² A survey of *Statistik Austria* (2008) showed that within 4 weeks 183,600 women and 102,800 men in Austria visited 'private orientated' adult education courses.

acting in the everyday life and in the biographical context. Furthermore, the feminist and pedagogic approach focuses on final conclusions, how women can increase the possibilities for autonomous choice and acting.

THE DATA

From 45 qualitative interviews, we selected six via theoretical sampling. Data consisted of interviews with women between 19 and 65 years old, married, divorced, single, with and without children, and in diverse job-related situations. The interviewees took courses in adult education institutions in Vienna. They were asked about the most important areas in their lives, about expectations of their past, future, and current areas of life, which are experienced as satisfying and dissatisfying.

THE MEANING OF RECONSTRUCTION IN OBJECTIVE HERMENEUTICS

In the analysis we were interested in exploring which and how structural dimensions determine women's acting. The purpose is not to collect and categorize the subjective meanings of the interviewees. Oevermann (2002) criticises this methodological path as "logic of subsumption." He emphasises, however, the *reconstruction* of the structural meaning of human acting with the method of objective hermeneutics. Following the understanding of objective hermeneutics, every human act is, in principle, based on social structures. These structures are not empirical, which means they are imperceptible and invisible, it is therefore crucial to reconstruct the latent structural meaning. Social structures are not only produced by human beings. Although these structures guide actions and are carried by people, they nevertheless have their own existence. Furthermore, these structures are real and timeless, yet they are not static, they are in a continuous process of transformation (Reichert, 1997).

MODIFIED UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The understanding of social structure was one aspect of Oevermann's thinking we did not agree with in every detail. In his perspective on the process of interpretation, social structures were only *reconstructed*. It seems to only be an updating of the existing structure. In our study, the understanding of social structure and its reconstruction is inspired by poststructural positions. Investigation is always realised as a *performative* act. Thus, this reconstruction is part of the production of structures and it makes no sense to depict structure as independent from the performance. Within different positions of language philosophy, the meaning of structure in objective hermeneutics is related to what Krämer (2001) specified as "two-world-model"—in contrast to the "performance-model." In the two-world-model, there is a distinction between a pure language, grammatical rules or competence, and the realization/updating in speaking or performing. Hence reconstruction meant to convey the structure from 'underground' up to the surface. While this perspective emphasises a pure language and pure structure in a performative point of view, the active act of performing is called attention to.

"We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do. Language is a name for our doing: both 'what' we do ... and that which we effect, the act and its consequences." (Butler, 1997, p. 8)

In such a conceptualisation, structural dimensions have no ontological position. They exist because of ritualised repetition of convention. Structures precede speech, but they need to be repeated to become an ongoing reality. To acknowledge that structures are not ontological does not lead to absolute arbitrariness. Structures are powerful formations. In this regard, what we re-constructed in our process of interpretation, are these 'powerful sedimentations,' which are structural and regulate women's acting. To speak about 'powerful sedimentations' stresses the fact that social structures are not unchangeable, it brings to light that it is not a question of ontology, but rather a question of power. This epistemology is associated with Haraway's (1988) "Situated Knowledges." In her essay, she describes knowledge as a "condensed node in an agonistic power field" (Haraway, 1988, p. 577). Objectivity cannot be claimed by hierarchical, positivist categorisations and assertion of universal truth. "Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledge*" (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). This implies that only a partial perspective promises an objective vision.

Acknowledging *performativity*, structures are not unchangeable and independent from acting. To delineate the obtained structural dimensions, which are powerful to common acting and biographical decisions, we used the model of a *rhizome* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1992). Deleuze and Guattari criticise classical thinking as hierarchical and binary. They use the metaphor of a tree to describe this conception of knowledge and suggest the metaphor of a rhizome instead. While the tree symbolises an origin entity with a primary root at the base, which is vertically and lineally organised, the rhizome works with horizontal connections without a centre. The model of a rhizome provides multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in data interpretation and the presentation of results. Accordingly, in our interpretation, we did not explore that 'main root,' we examined condensed nodes in the netting of the rhizome.

Due to the special limitation of this article many aspects of the research process cannot be described here, e.g. the important part of the close analysis (*Feinanalyse*), an accurate analysing method of texts.³

SOCIAL STRUCTURES IN WOMEN'S LIVES AND IMPLICATIONS TO FEMINIST ADULT EDUCATION

Presented within the results, structures of *time*, *energy* and *assurance* were powerful nodes that we have examined. They obtain relevance to the acting of women and they occur in different figures.⁴ Coming to an end of our article we only can offer partial insight into our results. We give an example of the structural node of time and finally we indicate implications to feminist-inspired adult education.

In regard to the structural node of time in women's lives, the conclusion was, that patterns of women's time are restricted and regulated by patriarchal structures. Furthermore, these patterns are connected with experiences like having too little or no time or simply with the impression that time is a scarce property. Concerning scarcity of time, Marianne Gronemeyer (2002) suggests that this is a human-made phenomenon even if it is already sediment in structures and seems 'natural.' Two important figures of

³ See the „steps of interpretation“ in Christof et.al, 2005, pp. 41-45 and Oevermann, 2002, pp. 6-17.

⁴ For a more detailed description see Christof et.al, 2005, pp. 184-200.

time structures in our findings were *simultaneity* and *one-after-the-other*. In the figure of simultaneity, women's lives are dominated by the force of doing different things at the same time. Regarding biographical patterns, we examined that women try to connect a professional life and familial duties. In their daily lives, women often symbolically serve as 'personalised time managers' for their family members. Every member posts his/her dates in it. Women try to match many different time-related desires at the same time. Consequently, women have no time to their own, and this structure makes it appear that they are without personal needs. In the structural time figure of one-after-the-other, one result was that women follow new forms of normative patterns. Biographically, they first aim to gain a good vocational education, before thinking of having a family. Personal interests or desires, which cannot be managed at the same time, have to be shifted into the future or may be never resumed.

The invisibility of these *time figures* seems crucial. Regarding the starting point of the research project: general adult education, this is an important insight. Adult education that makes women's lives seriously must reveal and address, and communicate to the structures which dominate women's lives. Education programs, aimed to help women manage their lives within those structures only reinforces them, e.g. courses for time management 'help' women cope with scarcity of time, neglecting that scarce time structures are powerful nodes within social structures. Instead, education which supports women gaining more possibilities for autonomous choices and actions, have to offer insights into the structural dimensions of acting, in this example concerning time. Therefore women can gain awareness of how structural dimensions dominate their lives and how these powerful sedimentations are socially constructed in an understanding of performativity, which at the same time lead to the perspective of convertibility as a matter of principle. Feminist adult education does not only criticise, but it is also inspired by development of visions and discovery of new ways of living.

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