

Method and Fieldwork in a Hermeneutical Perspective

Abstract

In their acclaimed study of 'Laboratory Life' Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar point out that laboratory science is essentially a persuasive activity. The scientists amass arguments in order to convince their colleagues of the truth of their way of perceiving the world. This is no less true of any other science. The way we conduct a scientific discourse with our fellow scholars is to present arguments and facts that support our case. The arguments do not appear out of nowhere, they are gathered or constructed in some way, and the way they are constructed is what we usually call 'method'.

The two things that have the most direct and strongest influence on method are research objectives and field accessibility. Research objectives straightforwardly determine method since the topic which we wish to gain knowledge about determines what kind of knowledge we seek to obtain. Field accessibility, in turn, limits and conditions our method by setting restrictions on the knowledge we can obtain. In historical studies field accessibility is given by the amount of historical evidence that has been preserved. In contemporary studies it is often given by how willing to be studied the informants in the field are.

I illustrate the discussion on method with two examples from my ongoing research on the everyday work life of computer programmers. The research is a contemporary study within the field of ethnology, specifically within the ethnological tradition of workplace studies as pursued by e.g. Billy Ehn. The first example is a series of interviews conducted mostly by phone with individuals from twenty-three European companies. The second example is a period of four weeks of participatory observation in a small company in Turku. Together, they show how research objectives and field accessibility shape and determine the methods I use. However, the shaping of method is not strictly a one-way process. The method chosen may in turn have consequences both for the objectives and the accessibility of the study.

To take a hermeneutical view of science, theory can be understood as a part of the pre-conception, in the sense of Gadamer, that we have before we attempt an interpretation of the empirical field. Specifically, it is a part of pre-conception that has been made explicit and given a certain form. In this view, method can be understood as the means of engaging in a dialogue with the field, a dialogue that is played out in the hermeneutical circle – the shifting back and forth between the researcher's understanding and the facts offered by the field.

Since the hermeneutical circle of interpretation is a continuous process it is both unpredictable and ever changing. It follows that we do ourselves a disservice if we try from the outset to place absolute limits on method, the means of engaging in the circle. Methodology, the study of method, should be a source of inspiration for dialogue and not a prescriptive set of rules – otherwise we might risk that discipline becomes a bad master of science instead of being a faithful servant.