

Disidentification, anxiety and narration as epistemological windows. Questioning the process of knowledge construction in a research in Chiapas, Mexico

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ABSTRACT:

One possible question to open the debate on the specific modes of intervention in the field of social research is: How to build a narrative that accounts for the actors' ability to generate knowledge? Based on this question, the paper proposes a set of tools to analyze the institutional conditions of social research practice, which facilitates the recognition of hierarchies that pervade the relationship between actors and researchers. This awareness creates the possibility for an encounter whose purpose is the joint production of social knowledge which transcends the academic institutional logic.

KEYWORDS: social knowledge; social research; institutional conditions.

RESUMO:

Uma possível questão para iniciar o debate sobre os modos específicos de intervenção no campo da pesquisa social é: como construir uma narrativa que explana a capacidade dos atores para gerar conhecimento? Com base nesta questão, o artigo propõe um conjunto de ferramentas para analisar as condições institucionais da pesquisa social que facilita o reconhecimento das hierarquias que permeiam a relação entre atores e investigadores. Esta consciencialização cria a possibilidade de um encontro cujo objetivo é a produção conjunta de conhecimento social que transcende a lógica institucional académica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: conhecimento social; investigação social; condições institucionais.

Introduction

In the field of social research, and particularly regarding the research with social actors, it is important to keep a perspective that does not reduce the role of those actors to mere instruments in the work being done. More and more we see that far from conceiving themselves only as subjects of social and political action those actors also view themselves in respect to a production of knowledge about their practice. Thus, the modalities through which research is conceived and through which researchers position themselves with actors, as well as the actors themselves, are being challenged by a debate that makes the legitimacy of the subject of enunciation a central theme.

Such a theme demands a change of perspective in order to allow a different sort of relationship between researchers and social actors to be established, a relationship whose essential reason is the necessity to negotiate the project and the sense and meaning of re-

search. This is to acknowledge that one, as researcher, is being affected by the bond that is established with the Other, and to build a shared perspective towards the process of knowledge construction.

Our perspective has developed from practical work with social actors in Chiapas, Mexico, in combination with an academic elaboration of this experience. Chiapas is a terrain characterized by the struggle for recognition of social actors as political subjects. The struggle for dignity in Chiapas has become manifest in several uprisings and more recently has become world famous through the Zapatista uprising and project of autonomy. These struggles created political referents like "*Nunca más un México sin nosotros*" ["Never again a Mexico without us"] and "*Dignidad indígena*" ["indigenous dignity"], which became well known. Such a social and political context urges researchers to accord a special position to the Other in their research projects.

However, in academic research we meet conditions that go beyond the control of the researcher. The academic institution imposes modes of control by setting criteria for the approval of research projects which limit the possibilities to realize a more open exchange with social actors. In spite of those limitations it is possible to introduce a field of reflection which focuses on those interferences which arise between academic discourse about scientific research in social sciences and field practice which enables or opens the space for the encounter with the Other.

Those exchanges can be appropriate sources from which to observe and experience a constant instability in the relationship between the unplanned emergence of social significations and aspects which come into light on the basis of the encounter with the Other and the planned character of the methodological procedures of research. This instability represents a crucial point in the construction of a different encounter which allows for the creation of distinctive bonds between researchers and social actors.

On the basis of the work of Breuer (2003) we set up those instabilities as *epistemological windows*. This view allows the identification of tensions which generally tend to be ignored or are interpreted as inexperience of the researcher. Seen as epistemological opportunities, they represent fundamental sources of knowledge in respect to the very process of research itself. Thus, the account of the forms of institutional implications of the researcher which restrict the possibilities of this interchange appear as a first epistemological window from which to consider this process. More than listing criteria which can help to analyze these implications¹, we seek to take hold of them in the very course of action in doing research, and try to dismantle them from the institutional apparatus in which they are inserted. We titled this first window *disidentification*, employing the concept developed in the terrain of political action by Rancière (1995). The work on disidentification constitutes the first part of this essay. A second window opens a view on the recognition of a series of dynamics related to the emergence of *anxieties*. Anxieties present themselves as modes of insecurity and tend to be suppressed within the framework of research. We recur to the work of Devereux (1966) and Breuer (2003) in order to characterize this insecurity as a methodological resource. The employment of this tool as a loss of certainty in respect to “scientific” rigor constitutes the second part of the essay. Finally, a third part concerns the notion of *narration* as an instrument which helps us to create a field of shared experience among researchers and social actors on the basis of Walter Benjamin’s essay *The Narrator* (1936).

1. Disidentification

If we depart from the idea that the construction of knowledge in social sciences is inscribed in a tension between different perspectives, it is necessary to identify not only the characteristics of these ways of perceiving and signifying social research, but also the methodological tools by which knowledge is produced. On the basis of this understanding we point out two different directions of doing research: in order to talk about a continuum of continuous displacement, on one pole we figure the positions and representations that prioritize a method whose constitution presupposes that a strict methodology guarantees access to the truth of the object. On the other pole, the priority would lie on the field of bonding² between the researcher and those who are the reference of her or his work. This relationship is conceived as a field in which meaning is unstable and must be negotiated, which then constitutes the very basis of knowledge production.

Now, in this later terrain where the subject (both the researcher and the Other) gains importance because of her lived experience and the type of bonds she establishes with the Other, it is necessary to consider some tools – conceptual and methodological – which allow us to locate oneself on a relational map, knowing that this geography of bonds and relationships does not only consist in the presence of the ones involved and their way of conceiving that relationship.

It extends to multiple domains of socio-historical *affectation*³, which in turn form identities, assign functions and thus have effects on behavior and the types of relationships among and between these identities.

The notion of *disidentification* is one of these tools we want to present to help clarify what we mean. A tradition of thought we might call *post-foundational political thought* rests on a perspective in which the political is separated from the institution of polity and acquires a dynamics of its own, centered in the social process and its forms of antagonism. We find Benjamin Arditì’s reading of what Rancière called “political subjectivation” (Arditì 2005) useful. Rancière (1995) conceives this process as a particular mode of production of acts that refer to the subject’s capacity of enunciation. This capacity of enunciation does not exist beforehand. It does not come with the existence of identities which are already constituted and the trajectories of those identities, but on the contrary, their own acts put these identities into question.

Arditì points out that this process does not only consist in confirming an identity, but also in refusing an identity given by others. This is a process of *dis-identification*, *dis-classification* of a social order in which the different spaces of articulation imply a set

¹ The concept of “implication” has been worked upon in the movement of *Analyse Institutionnelle* in France from the 1970s onwards and continues to be a referent for designing research in social psychology of groups and institutions in the *Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Xochimilco*, in Mexico City. See Lapassade *et al.* (1977); Lourau (1975); Lamihi and Monceau (2002); and Manero (1996).

² On the figure of “bonding” in Latin American psychosocial thought, see Mier (2003) and Pinchón-Rivière (1982).

³ See Deleuze, Guattari (1980), as well as Merleau-Ponty (1968) and Lyotard (1954).

of prescriptions and hierarchies in social organization, which are assumed as identities by those who carry out those functions.

Disidentification represents to Arditì the appearance of a possibility of non-correspondence between norm and acting, or between those functions which are previously assigned to a particular identity or social group and the possibility that a new realm of meaning emerges which has not been considered previously, in which signification can only be referred to a condition of openness, of displacement of preconceived identities.

For Arditì, this presupposes the practice of dissent; here, the author refers to Rancière, in whose definition of the political action the practice of dissent plays a primordial role. Thus, for Arditì dis-identification is a notion which gives rise to an enactment of a conflict between different forms and categories of relating to the Other which are already instituted⁴ – otherwise the relationship is defined by the identity previously assigned to them and to an experience which does not lead to anything else but an identification with a non-space.

In order to explain this notion of dis-identification Arditì quotes an example given by Rancière: the 1890 trial for rebellion of the revolutionary Augusto Bianqui. When the judge asked Bianqui to name his profession, Bianqui responded: “Proletarian”, an answer to which the judge objected: “This is not a profession”. And the accused replied: “It’s the profession of thirty million French who live of their work and are deprived of their political rights”.

This example illustrates a double dimension, on the one side there is a professional identity which is socially assigned and renowned, which in the case of Bianqui would be that of a worker, and which presupposes a certain degree of subordination to a social condition which the judge re-applies. “Proletarian” in turn does not exist as a “given” identity and, by insisting to identify himself as such, Bianqui refuses the position which the authorities take and he assumes an identity space from which he claims justice. This effects de-classification of socially acclaimed categories and the attributions implied to these categories, at the same time as a new space of identification emerges from which a new condition can be pronounced which has been hitherto denied or rendered invisible and un-expressible.

This perspective of the notion of dis-identification as it is employed in the political realm can be transferred to the terrain of a reflection about the roles which researchers carry out in respect to those who inhabit their field of research. As researchers, we are subject to a particular mode of conceiving our professional identity through assignments of the academic or scientific institution: these assignments shape the capacity and legitimacy of producing and conceptualizing knowledge to the researchers. To the Others,

⁴ On this matter, see Castoriadis (1987).

the so-called “subjects” of research, the prevailing discourse assigns the position of informants. They are the raw material from which knowledge is constructed⁵ – without even allowing for the creation of relational bonds through which the question of justice would be reframed⁶. What would be fair to give “back to them”⁷?

Disidentification can thus be conceived in the terrain of social research as a notion which points at thinking through a process of interrogation about positions, positionalities, and the status of these positions that are occupied as socially approved categories of identity, which again are assumed by the ones who participate in social research, both the researcher and the researched. This normalizing process is refused when the researcher seeks to unveil an institutional logic that implies a form of colonizing⁸ or forms of epistemological violence⁹ along with the imposed categories and forms of conceiving scientific knowledge. At the same time, the researcher can then contribute to enabling conditions that make it possible for new forms of meaning to emerge – in an encounter and interlocution between social actors and researchers, conditions that give way to new experiences in the production of knowledge.

This perspective requires the recognition of the Other as capable of producing arguments which account and give meaning to social life¹⁰. What is shared and in common is that both sides take part in the production of meaning in the research project, on the basis of experience. It is the quest for understanding that guides the question of what are we doing there – that, asked in a radical manner in the form of a constant interrogation, leads us towards a deconstruction of all preconceived arrangements which we usually establish in relation to the encounter with the Other¹¹. Only this makes it possible to appear in front of the Other with an openness to dialogue, being exposed to the presence of the Other, and thus being exposed to insecurity¹².

Thus, the project of every research, more than pro-

⁵ See the critique of using the testimonials as mere raw material in a mode of scientific discourse production in which the academy is posed as a machine inserted in a capitalist political economy presented by Beverley (1993).

⁶ The quest for justice as constant search and approximation is elaborated in Derrida (1990).

⁷ See Mato (2000) and his critical comment on the Founding Statement of the Subaltern Studies Group.

⁸ On the concept of “decolonizing academic discourse”, see Mohanty (2001) and Suárez-Navaz, Hernández (2008).

⁹ On the concept of “epistemic violence”, see Spivak (1988). Also see Bhabha (1994).

¹⁰ Some references for this attitude in research: Borda (1986); Freire (1970).

¹¹ See Mier (2002).

¹² For a philosophical discussion of the desire to stay within the center of interpretation and to avoid the anxiety that implies the negotiation of the system of references, see Derrida (1989). Nancy (1990) develops the concept of community as a task to expose oneself to the encounter with the Other in which a new communication is being searched and previous identifications are left aside inoperative.

ducing knowledge, consists of constructing the conditions by which this exposition to openness can take place, for both the researcher and the participants in the research project. It is in this arrangement where the work of dis-identification in respect to positions and functions can take place, positions and functions that presuppose constituted identities to which status and forms of action have been assigned. It gains a particular relevance, because it introduces a shared way of interrogation, of dis-classification of the logic we work by. It is a shared way of producing new meaning on the basis of an encounter which always seeks to do justice to the Other (see Derrida, 1990).

2. Compasses for walking with anxiety on the road of disidentification

It is in this process, in this exposing of oneself, that anxieties arise, when we perceive that the methodology and tools we bring with us are not sufficient to respond to the encounter with social actors. Because they may have different forms of signifying reality which do not fit the logic we bring in our questionnaires and project outlines.

In this more open pathway, the invitation and permission is to experience the “dwindling of reinventing one’s own way of seeing” (Mier 2002, p. 32). However we do not have to move without compass, without epistemological referents that reassure us that this openness and this *not-knowing* are intentional, and are part of a chosen way of doing research. Taking up Derrida’s call of “rendering delirious that interior voice which is the voice of the Other in us” (Derrida 1982, p. 71), Mier (2003) proposes a mode of reflection conceived as anthropological act in the sense of a self-anthropology and an account of the forms of bonding we establish with social actors.

In his text on subjectivity and reflexivity as epistemic windows, Breuer (2003) argues that in the intent of affirming a supposed objectivity and avoiding a loss of control over the conditions of knowledge production “researchers often enact *defense* strategies in their choice of methods rather than confronting the epistemological challenge” (Breuer 2003, p. 5). Breuer draws on the work of Georges Devereux (1966) in order to place those moments of uncertainty as productive opportunity, “as an *epistemic window* and a possibility for *methodological innovation*” (Breuer 2003, p. 5).

On the basis of a re-reading of Devereux’ text *From anxiety to method in the behavioural sciences* (1966), Breuer points out that the character of social research has to do with mutual affectation. This mutual affectation elicits specific reactions on both sides in addition to those produced by the intended methodical procedures (2003). From his background as a psychoanalyst and ethnologist, Devereux describes these irritations as reactions of counter-transference and suggests analyzing them in the same way a psychoanalyst would analyze his/her subjective reactions to the reactions of his/her subject of analysis. Devereux demonstrat-

ed how the resistance towards those counter-transferential challenges can appear disguised as method (Devereux 1966). Sticking to the frames of references, methods and procedures can function as a means to reduce the anxiety. Following Devereux, who suggested that these unexpected stimuli should be treated as fundamental data which instead of being suppressed should be exploited as much as possible (1966), Breuer highlights the recommendation of Devereux to take these challenges as opportunities of epistemological productivity between different subject perspectives.

The work of “participatory action research”¹³, “popular education”¹⁴, the debate for a “decolonial turn”¹⁵, and the “decolonization of feminism”¹⁶ can be seen as opportunities for disidentification in which so-called intellectuals with privileged access to modes of knowledge-production and distribution worked to unlearn their privilege to name and speak about the social actors, and established pathways towards a culture of speaking *with* them¹⁷.

3. Narration as encounter

If the creation of moments and interactions which facilitate disidentification and the exposure to openness takes place as a part of the research process, it is necessary to think of tools which help us to construct this shared experience. This experience necessitates a deconstruction of our research paradigms which operate as institutional demands¹⁸ and demands a quest for a different encounter between social actors and researchers. We recur to a particular way of conceiving the experience of narration as presented by Walter Benjamin, given that narration is the medium in which this shared experience occurs, during which ideas are given and heard. In this brilliant essay Benjamin points out that the narrator fashions from experience what he tells, be that his or her own experience or that related by others (Benjamin, 1991). And then this experience also becomes the experience of those who listen. For Benjamin, the extent to which the narrated history finds a place in the memory of the Other, and finds repercussion in his experience, is as much as “the one who listens forgets about himself and as profound as the heard impresses him” (Benjamin, 1991, p. 71). In

¹³ For an overview, see Barbier (1996).

¹⁴ See, for example, Freire (1970) and also Borda (1986).

¹⁵ Notice, for example, the organizing of a Conference on *Mapping the Decolonial Turn* at the University of California at Berkeley, April 21-23, 2005. Also see Mignolo (2007).

¹⁶ From the 1980s onwards, in postcolonial feminism and nowadays in transnational feminism there has been a struggle for a decolonization of feminism. This can be seen as an example of disidentification with regard to a hegemonic position in the definition of feminist agendas. See Anzaldúa (1981), Mohanty (1986; 2003), Minh-Ha (1989), Marcos, Waller (2005), or Suárez-Navaz, Hernández (2008). Another example are the *Whiteness Studies*, which analyze the privileges of whiteness. See Aenerud (2002), McIntosh (2004) or Frankenberg (1993).

¹⁷ See Spivak (1988).

¹⁸ On the analysis of institutional demands, see Lourau (1975).

this perspective, narration is a space of exchange, of communication, and not an act of information in the sense of a solitary production of the narrator. Thus, it contains the three moments Marcel Mauss describes in order to point out what is at stake in what he calls the “gift”: that is, to give, to receive, and to give back in return¹⁹. Narration appears as a space of exchange of experience, and it’s the very possibility of experience, to the extent that the participants are in a condition of being exposed to alterity; the one who narrates doesn’t do so in order to give information without an alteration of the narration by every audience – what is at stake is an atavistic way of transferring experience.

Those who listen appropriate the narration and this is not limited to the objective content of the discourse but relates to the Other as well, making sense through listening. This gives rise to two different ways of experimenting with narration: the experience that is shared through one’s own story, and the experience which can be shared by virtue of listening.

Let us take up this twofold perspective which is crushed every time in a modernity which hurries and where time pressures are privileged. The time which is necessary for communication is not provided. Let us reflect on the basis of those two moments – narration and the time for listening on the level of the relationship between social actors and researchers. Such a communicative encounter is possible if we practice an act of dismantling the institutionalized conditions which research implies and which in turn conditions our forms of acting and intervening in research. And it is also necessary as the need to construe scenarios where dialogue between social actors and researchers is altered. This implies then a listening capacity which is autonomous²⁰ in relation to the predetermined conditions of research and allows that the narration of the Other unfolds. In order to enable the Other to become autonomous, we have to turn ourselves into observers under observation. The narrator listens to himself by the listening of the Other. For those who listen, the narration exposes a way of seeing and conceiving which makes visible how social life is organized to the Other, how the schemes of thought and action are being confronted. It is this double and mutual affectation that facilitates a shared experience and a construction of sense and meaning on the basis of encounter.

This dialogue requires the presence of both in the experience of the narration. It is by a way of listening that refuses to operate or resist operating according to the predetermined schemes of research that the narration of the Other can give way to a new experience. The bonds of listening and narrating are mutually affected. The narrator finds a way to unfold his or her story as the one who listens, offers an attention which

does not curb his or her discourse and opens this dimension of listening as condition of his or her own narration, this is to say, a space in which the narrator can listen to himself or herself through listening to the Other. In the same way it is possible to say that for the one who is listening, the narration reveals a way of conceiving and signifying which, apart from its radical alterity, shows principles of organizing social life which respond to an/other’s schemes of thought and action. This necessarily confronts us as researcher and listener. This double affectation constitutes a fundamental component of the configuration of a shared experience and of a production of sense and of meaning on the basis of this encounter.

Conclusion

In this contribution we proposed a series of concepts for thinking of social research as a shared project of knowledge construction – *together with*, and not only *about*, social actors. We transferred the notion of “dis-identification” from the political terrain without losing its *politicality* and suggest that we, as researchers, need to bring this frame to our work both from the perspective of our own identities but also from the perspective of who we think the “subject” of research is. This will inevitably produce destabilization of knowledge, identity and certainty. In the context of participatory action research and academic work that reflects on a decolonization of research practices this situation of openness that results from a shift of the epistemological center has already been pointed out. We focused on the anxiety that arises from this moments of uncertainty and introduced a notion of counter-transference as a method to help us begin to think about and address defenses against this anxiety. We named a series of philosophical and academic works that set up this openness and need for redefinition of meaning as an intentional moment. Finally, we worked with the question of *narration* as a means by which experience is “exchanged” in order to offer a way to grapple with the need to occupy a space of affectation in the speaking-listening exchange.

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¹⁹ See Mauss, M. (1990).

²⁰ Castoriadis describes the project of autonomy as a project of elucidation: “the labor of individuals to attempt to think about what they do and to know what they think” (Castoriadis 1992, p. 114), in order to become autonomous of instituted significations (Castoriadis 1987).

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