

## Who do We Think We (and They) Are?

The Audience and the Researcher as Participants in Sociomaterial Practice

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## **Who do we think we (and they) are? The Audience and the Researcher as Participants in Socio-Material Practice**

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This brief contribution builds on reflections arising from a number of interrelated situations I experienced while engaging in participant observations in a Berlin kindergarten over the course of almost four months – situations that posed interpretational challenges, turning points that put my insights into a (temporary) state of “crisis” (cf. Vygotsky, 1998). The research process culminated in two central questions which I would like to discuss here: What do “we” researchers think we are and do when engaging in research, and how is this connected to what we think the participants in our research are and do in this constellation? The elaboration on these onto-epistemological questions proposes an alternative “contextualist approach” (Morley, 2012) and is supposed to contribute to ongoing debates in the field of (active) audience research that have been most clearly addressed in a special issue published in *The Communication Review* in 2006 (cf. the contributions of Press, 2006; Barker 2006a; Morley, 2006).

Allow me to set off my argument in medias res by re-narrating a few excerpts from my fieldwork materials:

Prior to starting my actual fieldwork stay in the kindergarten, I conducted a one-week pilot study in order to obtain a first impression of the persons I would want to work with (children, staff, parents) and the material conditions I would need to take into account (materialized space-time

arrangements) while “following” those persons. I was also granted the opportunity to give the pedagogical staff an introduction into my project during a regular staff meeting. I told the staff that my main research interest consisted in exploring how the children’s everyday use of (especially new) media would show in the kindergarten, what possibilities and difficulties would emerge, specifically how children would use media-related meanings in the interaction with others (again children, staff, parents). And I told them that while being part of the everyday life in the kindergarten, I needed their assistance in order to conduct my research: Not only had I never before worked in such a context and therefore no experience with regards to the everyday procedures and arrangements, but I also asked them to inform me whenever situations were occurring they thought might be relevant to me.

Meanwhile the presentation slowly turned into a conversation and subsequently a group discussion, stirred by a comment of the kindergarten leader: Different staff members started referring not only to possibilities, difficulties and societal demands related to child-technology interactions they encountered, but in relation to own and other adults’ experiences when using various media technologies at home, at work, in public transportation etc. Suddenly the topic was not merely education and the child-technology relationship anymore, but everyday human-technology relations in more general terms: They reported on what they found challenging and contradictory in everyday situations, and how one (as pedagogue and/or parent) can never be sure to do the “right thing” with regards to media technologies. In my interpretation, they were already connecting their “everyday research interests” to my research interests.

The next day, I was informed by one of the pedagogues that she was initiating a small project: The kindergarten had some old CRT displays left

over, and she wanted to dismantle one of them together with some interested children. She invited me to join the activity. I was able to observe, photograph and converse with the children involved, and later these children turned out to become some of my research's most important participants. Another example of how my research interest was picked up by the staff abounded some weeks later during the main study: A girl in one of the kindergarten groups wanted to show her fellow group members some recent holiday photos her parents had stored on a DVD. The two group pedagogues decided to use a projector rather than a small screen, and together with the leader's and my assistance, they set up the ensemble of required technological devices. After the first photo-viewing session, they asked for my observations. We agreed that the children seemed to be used to watching photos in such an arrangement, but eventually they did not consider what was actually required to make the ensemble of technologies work. As a consequence, the two pedagogues decided to organize a long-term project around all those media technologies frequently used in the kindergarten (computer-projector arrangement, digital photo camera, etc.)

So what are these episodes about? Evidently enough, a multiplicity of somehow interconnected socio-material relations across situations. In the course of this contribution, however, I would like to point out three particular aspects of these relations that are closely linked to the question of "what is an audience?" and consequently to assumptions about who "they" (participants) and who "we" (researchers) are:

1. The transcontextuality of experiencing, participation and of making sense out of (cultural) meanings.
2. The material and especially the intersubjective mediatedness of everyday actions, or of one's own conduct of everyday life and the conducts of others in relation to shared challenges in practice.

3. The historically situated, everyday embeddedness of the research process, ergo acknowledging that doing research is part of the researcher's own conduct of everyday life, and that it should reflect upon its transcontextuality, historicity and its socio-material interdependencies and limitations.

### **Participation and mediated socio-material experiencing**

Although throughout the rest of this argument, these three aspects will mostly be discussed on a more general – namely the conceptual – level, they materialized in particular situations I participated in during fieldwork: The general is inextricably intertwined with the particular (Dreier, 2007). Such a dialectical understanding of the constitution of knowledge lies at the heart of the subject-scientific project entitled “German-Scandinavian Critical Psychology” (Nissen, 2012; cf. also Schraube & Osterkamp, 2012; for a short introduction into the approach's history, cf. Papadopoulos, 2009; the German language standard work: Holzkamp, 1983). By means of this and further critical psychological assumptions about and concepts for grasping the human-world relationship, I wish to offer an alternative understanding of the “audience” in broader terms as well as of how to work with or relate to such an “audience” in a social science research process.

Of course the term “audience” implies that there must be something to be an audience for, namely the media. Consequently the focus could rather be put on the audience-media relationship. Critical Psychology would claim that the ontological status of these categorizations cannot be clarified separately, but only in relation to each other. Audience and media do not exist without each other. Still it needs to be emphasized that epistemologically speaking, “we” human beings can access this mutually co-dependent relationship *exclusively* from our very own “first-person perspectives” (Schraube, forthcoming), hence from the audience's – including the researchers' points of view. Human beings are bound

to their historically developed position in society, and one's own perspective on this "society" and its conditions is situated and mediated: One's own perspective depends on the concrete experiences made across one's lifespan. It is not the whole world we experience and can relate to in our present existence, but those miniscule details of world "we" socio-materially participate(d) in. However, this "mediated experiencing" goes beyond that which we consciously remember (e.g., Holzkamp, 1983). And it encompasses experiencing "mediatized" meanings.

Here the term "mediatization" with its' various interpretations (e.g., Lundby, 2009) needs to be differentiated from the general "mediatedness" of experiencing the world (cf. also Morley, 2012). Paraphrasing Sonia Livingstone (2009), Critical Psychology would indeed claim that "everything is mediated" – at least from a human being's perspective. Conditions cannot be "immediately" accessed, but are mediated via one's own socio-cultural-historical becoming in relation to others and the (material) conditions. A person can only relate to the meaning side of the "real" conditions, and to those specific aspects of that meaning side that appear subjectively meaningful in specific situations, as premises and possibilities for action. "Mediatized" (ergo media-technology-mediated) meanings are only part of the scope of imaginable possibilities, but their relevance for our everyday lives unquestionably seems to increase (cf. Krotz, 2009). Relating this understanding of "mediation" and "mediatedness" to the above vignette, it is obvious that neither the staff members nor I as researcher can grasp the "reality" of "the child" or of "the media" as conditions, but only relate to a few socio-culturally-historically specific aspects of those conditions that to a certain extent are undoubtedly also mediatized. And we (as participants in a shared situation) think them meaningful for the specific situation we find ourselves in (staff meeting, group discussion) and try to (individually and collectively) make sense of each other's meaning relations (cf. Nissen, 2012).

**The transcontextual and intersubjective conduct of life of “the audience”**

In a nutshell: Persons do not “meet” societal structures or conditions directly, but in socio-materially mediated relations (to others and material arrangements) across everyday situations in practice (cf. Dreier, 2008, 2009). Practices are, in principal, dynamic and constantly developing, also because the *human beings participating in and thus co-constituting practice* are constantly developing. Nevertheless do many practices appear (almost) unchangeable, as they build on a set of more or less static, previously negotiated meanings, that up to a certain point seem to “work” for everyone involved in that practice. But the first-person perspectives on these shared conditions are potentially always changing in relation to how the participants conduct their everyday lives across all those other contexts they are part of on a daily basis; and often enough, previously negotiated, shared meanings need to be re-negotiated – especially after being challenged by another one’s conduct of life in a shared practice. Hence the notion that one’s own conduct of life always depends on others and how they conduct their everyday lives (Holzkamp, 2013a), and I would add: irrespective whether for better or worse. Other persons can certainly make life seem harder, but fundamentally speaking, other persons primarily possibilitate one’s own existence, whether in abstract terms as society, or more concretely speaking as “significant others” (although there cannot be any insignificant others, but that is food for another paper). Others question, challenge one’s own perspective, are indispensable for wonderment, development and change (cf. also Vygotsky, 1998).

All this points to the ineluctable *transcontextual intersubjectivity* of sense-making as part of conducting one’s life in socio-material practice (cf. Højholt/Kousholt, 2009): A kindergarten pedagogue giving advice to parents inside the kindergarten context hopes this advice to have consequences for the home context. If the family makes it part of the practice at home (not only the

parents, but also the child), this may in turn have consequences for the kindergarten context. In the above vignette, the pedagogues similarly try to relate to my research interest by connecting it to their very own everyday experiences across various contexts. Such re-relating to experiences is never exclusively bound to one context, but always points beyond the concrete context one participates in here and now. And since this re-relating to past experiences is inherent to organizing and coordinating present and future everyday activities (cf. the “dual perspective” in Holzkamp, 2013b), it can be concluded that the everyday conduct of life human beings are engaged in on a daily basis must be investigated and interpreted intersubjectively and transcontextually. Consequently, it seems for instance insufficient to merely concentrate on the concrete media use/consumption situation. Rather, media research would need to systematically focus on what the “audience” makes out of that experience in other situations with other persons (e.g., in the kindergarten; or in a book club, cf. Radway, 1997). From the perspective of Critical Psychology, a “contextualist approach” is necessarily a transcontextual approach; and it is one that understands that also the researcher’s research activity in a specific context is intertwined with a number of other persons and contexts the researcher conducts his/her everyday life with/across.

### **The researcher as participant and contributor to the investigated socio-material practice**

So let us suppose all of the above said about audience participants also holds true for the researcher – after all, the researcher does not only conduct her/his everyday life in academia, but intertwined with others across multiple socio-material contexts. And s/he also is often enough part of an “audience”, be it in the movie theater, listening to the car radio, or at home. Then the research interest, the (societal) challenges and problems identified by the (social science)



researcher, are connected to practice conditions shared by many other human beings in society. Certainly, the researcher has his/her distinct, historically developed and situated first-person perspective on those challenges. But the meanings for (or mediatedness of) the shared conditions are also partly shared, and if they are not, academic publishing (mostly) aims at *sharing* one's own sense-making of the conditions' meaning side with others.

Again, this seems trivial: Researchers and "the audience" (partly) inhabit the same world, or else the researchers' problems would be completely detached from the audience's (and I presume this is not what any social science researcher would like to claim). Although there is a seemingly open-ended multiplicity of varying perspectives on the shared conditions – explainable via a set of always different ontogenetic experiences – there are many similarities in how (via socio-culturally-historically created artefacts) and why (individual reasons for action) human beings relate to these conditions. What a researcher (hopefully) sets out for is to find others who can make sense of his/her own interpretations of how s/he relates to the world, others who can relate to his/her own perspective.

This (hardly groundbreaking) onto-epistemological insight needs to be systematically considered when developing a research methodology. The Qualitative Heuristic Approach (Kleining & Witt, 2000, 2001) provides some suggestions for how to look for similarities across a variety of perspectives, and this is what I set out to do when presenting my project at the staff meeting: I emphasized that I believe my research problem not only to be my problem, and that is why I would be interested in hearing and observing how the staff members themselves, the children and the parents would relate to similar challenges with regards to their media-related experiencing, and how the sense they made of these experiences would be (re-)negotiated in the kindergarten context across perspectives. As Silverstone suggested in 2005, research problems need to be formulated (and tackled) *de bas en haut*, or as I would say: from the particular

perspectives towards the more generally shared meanings for conditions in practice.

The researcher tries to expand her\_his own particular perspective via the other practice participants' perspectives, and in that s\_he is dependent of the others, as much as in any other moment of conducting one's everyday life in and across contexts. Such research as a collaborative task would ideally take place in terms of a *socio-symmetrical dialogue* (Schraube, forthcoming), and it builds on the idea that the research process itself appears not only fruitful for and sensible to the researcher, but also for the other participants in practice – that it promotes the social self-understanding of all participating *co-researchers* (Holzkamp, 2013a), in my case also of the children.

In this sense, the researcher not only becomes a participant in, but rather a contributor to the investigated practice (even if the researcher appears only highly mediated in the form of a camera, a survey, or whatever). The researcher actively changes the practice s\_he wishes to explore and becomes part of the practice's becoming and henceforth, the other participants' conducts of life. In the above vignette, this influence became manifest very early (already the day after my initial presentation) and initiated a long-term change of some of the relations in the investigated practice.

### **Just a question of methodology?**

Such an (inherently interventionist) understanding of what (social science) research is and does has far-reaching consequences for how to design and conduct research, consequences that point beyond choosing the most appropriate methodology. Nissen (2012) argues that social science research always tries to model alternative societal relations, and is thus always a political undertaking. Subsequently the researcher's responsibility and accountability must be spotlighted, and instead of merely asking "who are we?" and "who are they?",

every research report also needs to deal with the question of “who do we do our work for?” – a question that with reference to Bertolt Brecht in Morley (2006) may never be answerable, but may rather be discussed in a more precise manner the next time around. Recent audience research has often touched upon this “for whom?” question (cf. Press, 2006; Barker, 2006a; Morley, 2006; Livingstone, forthcoming), and it has been pivotal for those audience research approaches that take their point of departure in the everyday life challenges of human beings (e.g., Silverstone, 2005; Bakardjieva, 2005).

This contribution suggests picking up and amplifying these impulses by conceptualizing subjectivity as dialectically intertwined with the intersubjective and material dimensions of the human conduct of everyday life, thereby productively challenging notions of “we” and “they”, of “the researcher” and “the audience”. One alternative is to think of all research participants as contributors to socio-material practice, and to make the aim of research a transcontextual *collaborative purposeful transformation of the world* (Stetsenko, 2008). But that would presuppose humility on behalf of the researcher, by acknowledging that his\_ her own perspective (experiences, knowledge, imaginable possibilities for action) is *historically-situated* (Barker, 2006b), *ideological* (Nissen, 2012) and consequently always *limited*, and that s\_ he requires the others’ perspectives on the shared world, common problems and challenges in order to expand it, to learn and to develop – or: to make research truly relevant.

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