

Sustainable Methods?

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Introduction

Considering Social Sciences as a critical project – deconstructing what we know (substantive knowledge and issues) and how we come to know it (epistemological approaches and issues), quite a few researchers have proceeded to make it into a political project. The aim then is not only deconstruction but construction and “emancipatory knowledge/ knowledge for liberation”. Here we find researchers who, founded on the long traditions within western philosophy, argue theoretically on the grounds of ontology (“what we are as humans) or epistemology (“how to know what we are”) or both ways. They tell us, through the voices of great thinkers, how to understand it all. There are however other researchers, on the same ontological and epistemological platform (roughly speaking), who argue that this very foundation call for other approaches when the aim is emancipatory knowledge. If the human is a relational being her search for knowledge is relational and dialogical. Approaches and methods making use of and exploring this relationship is accordingly a better way to both knowledge and its dissemination. We – the argument goes - need to know together, as a joint process, not being told what to know and how by someone who knows it all, for us.

Such an approach implies another researcher – research subject relation, where the subjects are made into “co-researchers”. To what extent and at what stages throughout the research project, varies however with the approach and method in question. Dialogical research as such, is a broad approach, where quite different methods and techniques are being used, accordingly resulting in a variety of ways for the subject to be a co-researcher. Coming from feminist research myself, inspired by the approach of Dorothy E. Smith, “institutional ethnography”, and Frigga Haug, “memory work”, I was struck by its non-dialogical relation to dialogical research, or rather, vice versa. Dialogical research procedures could obviously benefit from the concretized procedures developed within memory work. And the approach of institutional ethnography, its method of inquiry, would guide the dialogical research not only to make the social visible but also to illuminate the role of ruling relations and power in everyday life and relations. However valuable such a translation from one perspective into another might be, this is not the road I will embark on here. Instead I want to focus on what they all seem to neglect or make invisible; our relation as humans to nature.

Natured dialogic research

The article “Justice, Sustainability, and Participation” by Peter Reason (Reason 2002), made me aware that even emancipatory approaches and methods only focus on relations between humans. Such relations are made use of to know about the social, understood as social relations between humans. If nature as a theme should happen to enter it is mediated through such relations. But nature is most often neither a theme nor a human relation explored in its own right. We might have embodied social sciences and methods – at least to some extent – but we have definitely not “natured” our disciplines and approaches. And by making the role of nature in everyday life invisible, we reproduce the ruler’s perspective. Our ways of knowing is trapped by the project of Modernity, they do not deconstruct its un-natured understanding of the social. And accordingly our ways of knowing cannot contribute in constructing a natured understanding of the social, a natured emancipatory knowledge.

Climate changes and crises might promote a change of perspectives, to nature them, so as to raise both consciousness and activism among us all. I do wonder, however, if not our understanding of most topics and relations would have been improved, if we had natured them. Take for example the research project on the sociality of tiredness, Ulla-Britt Lilleaas and I completed a couple of years ago (Lilleaas& Widerberg 2001, Widerberg 2007. Here we focused on what generated or drained the energy of people in different jobs and life situations. Neither we nor our research subjects thematized the role of nature. But just because we did not ask about it, or they themselves did not bring it up, does not mean that nature did not play a decisive role in relation to energy. Fresh air, light, the sun in your face, the song of birds, the running of water, raindrops, the smell of grass, wet earth and flowers, the formation of clouds, the moon, the stars in the sky, the light night or the dark night, walking in the snowfall, the gliding on snow when skiing...the list is as endless as the list of its opposites; no fresh air, grey skies, bad smells, lack of light, lack of views, noises... The role of nature in “refilling our batteries”, in giving us hope and a passion for life, can hardly be questioned. But it still needs to be made visible. And here I believe dialogic research, memory work and institutional ethnography can be developed and used for the very purpose, to nature our understanding of the social. Maybe alongside new methods we have yet to develop to grasp our experiences as natured humans.

Let me her briefly expand on the first issue here - leaving the other for now to science fiction social scientists – that is, how we can use existing approaches and methods for natured purposes.

Natured memory work

The very aim of the method, to make visible the things we take for granted, is the perfect starting-point. And the procedures developed depending on the kind of group and the time the group has at its disposal for the memory-work, just as applicable when making nature visible in everyday life. If one for example teaches the method and chooses nature as a theme, the following steps could be taken;

- I ask the group to *write a story of a particular situation* that has really happened, yesterday or long ago, on the topic I have chosen, for example “ A situation when I was made aware of or experienced nature”. They are told to try to be *as concrete and descriptive as possible*, by relating in detail everything about the situation. They should also try to *use the words* they would have used at the time this situation occurred. This might mean that the ‘voice’ sounds stupid, mean or whatever, in the ears of the writer of today. Of course writing a memory always means interpretation, I tell them, since interpretation is what drives the memory forward, how and what we remember. And every memory has layers of interpretation, especially if the memory is of something that happened long ago. But even so, they should try not to analyse while writing, but give the story a chance to be told as straightforwardly as possible. Concepts, hasty analyses, immediately processing it academically – that is here more of a problem than a resource: it closes more than it opens for interpretation at this stage.
- Participants are further instructed to write the story *in three versions*: in the form of the first person and in the form of the male and female third person. With today's computers, this is easily done. One simply writes one story and then orders the machine to replace, for example, the ‘I’ with a ‘she’ and then the ‘she’ with a ‘he’. Even though the language might become a bit odd, three versions of the story are thus easily made. One purpose is to see what happens when you objectify yourself (sometimes it is easier to write a story in the third person) or establish a distance to yourself. But more importantly, by using the male and female form, the gender of the text is made visible, often in ways not visible when the gender was ‘accurate’.
- The text is *written then and there*, usually within a time limit of 1/2 – 1 hour. De-dramatising writing by doing it together, in a limited

time and anonymously makes it seem less pretentious and scary. Under such conditions, everybody can write something. The reason for writing the stories *anonymously*, however, is not only, or even primarily, to facilitate the writing process: it is meant to enrich the interpretation process. The stories are then interpreted collectively. No one can or is allowed to claim 'ownership' of the story (or of the 'correct' interpretation). The participants are further told that once the analyses have been completed, they can, if they so wish, tell each other which story was theirs. After the stories have been written and prepared in three versions for all participants, we *read the stories together*. We then discuss and analyse them as a whole. What kinds of situations and of what life-periods have we written about? And what have we not written about? Sometimes the silence in what we choose not to write about is just as interesting and thus worth analysing, as what we did write about.

- In this first and more general discussion and analysis of all the texts, the gender aspect, made visible through the three versions she, he, and I, is also made a topic. What makes the gender appear correct or wrong? The acting or the wording? For example, on the theme 'Getting dressed', which gender – when naked – starts by putting on the socks? And why do women always put on the underpants first, and not the bra? How we do gender all the time, is here made quite clear. But it also illuminates how very gendered our way of wording and writing about something is.
- To be able to make a more in-depth analysis of a situation and its language, one or two stories, usually rich ones, are chosen. Everything we see and learn when analysing the chosen story is written down on the blackboard, first unsystematically and later organised into sub-themes, situations, relations, emotions and so forth. Analysing goes on until nothing new comes up.

Other ways of using memory-work, some of which I have described at some length in a chapter in a recent book presenting the international research use of the method (Widerberg 2008), will be just as applicable. Writing a “memory- diary”, like we did in our project on tiredness, but focusing on natured experiences instead of tiring experiences, would definitely be a way to start, before embarking on “proper” research on the theme. And interdisciplinary group work by researchers, just like the one Ulla-Britt and I and a couple of other feminist researchers did on the theme “the body”, titled “Doing body/texts” (described in Widerberg 2008 with references to what we have written about this project), could

just as well be done on nature, “Doing nature/texts”. And of course it could be a subject for an individual memory work, like the one I did on “The gender of knowledge” (Widerberg 1995, also described for example in Widerberg 2008).

Summing up there is nothing in the method as such that prevent a fruitful use when the topic is nature or natured themes. Quite the opposite.

Natured institutional ethnography

Dorothy E. Smith’s critique of the sociological conventions for how the social is written and made into sociology, is just as relevant when nature is the theme. Starting in theoretical concepts and not in the activities and relations of real people, gives the upper hand to pre-given perspectives and ruling relations. Hereby natured everyday and-night experiences are made invisible. An alternative approach, a method of inquiry, labelled institutional ethnography, is her suggestion (For an introduction and presentation of her work see also for example Widerberg 2008). The aim is not only to make new things visible to us – the ethnographic approach - but also to illuminate the role of power and ruling relations in our everyday-night activities and life – the institutional approach. Mapping our activities and relations, hereby connecting different levels can illuminate how our “work knowledge” (her concept) might be “institutionally captured” (her concept) and therefore known to us and others in distorted ways. The aim of this method of inquiry is to produce knowledge about the social (about society) from the position of particular groups of people, of how society looks from that position. It is knowledge for people that is the goal, not knowledge about people.

Just like memory work, the approach of institutional ethnography, would be most fruitful in making natured work knowledge visible and what institutional captures do to it. That is, the approach could make us see the role of nature in our social activities and relations as well as when and how ruling relations enter the scene and the consequences hereof for our understandings of the role of nature in our everyday-night life. But nature has to be focused and made a theme, it does not – due to the ruling perspectives also dominating sociology and feminist research - come to the surface by itself! Even Dorothy E. Smith has so far not ventured to explore this path of natured social relations.

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