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DOING RESEARCH IN A POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT. NAVIGATING THE UNCONDITIONAL FROM A BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT: The aim of the article is to focus on the question of what is absolutely necessary for me in research and how to navigate it. To answer this question, I will refer to key experiences that are of great importance to me as a researcher. Based on my previous research, particularly in relation to my investigations in the highlands of Chiapas in Mexico, I will attempt to identify key elements that are essential to my research. More specifically, I will address important challenges that have fundamentally questioned and influenced my understanding of research and have been important for my development as a scientist. In particular, my research in postcolonial contexts has led me to many limits of my understanding of science and helped me to explore new paths and to further develop my original attitude as a researcher. Thinking about the question of the legitimacy of scientific (re-) presentation, for example, was an important turning point for my understanding of research. Against this backdrop, I will focus on doing research with postcolonial narratives and will highlight related epistemological, methodological and ethical issues I had to deal with during my research.

KEYWORDS: Biographical research, postcolonial narratives, epistemological, methodological and ethical issues.

Introduction

As researchers, we are socialised within scientific communities focusing on socially relevant issues with different theoretical perspectives and empirical approaches. Collecting research experiences, through different pathways, we may have had to deal with various epistemological, methodological and ethical challenges and developed our own research style as well. Even if our research style may differ from that of the past, our research practice should be based on comprehensive reflections to understand research as learning processes, which offer the opportunity not only to improve the quality of our research findings but also to develop as researchers. Reflections as an important part of doing research may include the following questions: What is unconditionally necessary for us in doing research? What kind of social reality are we trying to investigate and how can we link these social phenomena to a specific research interest? And what do we mean by empirical data, how do we collect it and from what perspective do we analyse this data? Finally, what do we think we can learn about our research and how can the research findings be presented to a wider audience to make an impact?

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If I have a look at my personal pathway as a researcher, then I realise that I was strongly influenced by research workshops on qualitative methods during my studies in Austria. We focused particularly on narrative-biographical interviews, the life histories of people related to different topics and analysed how people construct themselves in relation to the world in which they live. By working with these biographical narratives, it was possible to gain deep insights into complex social construction processes, which gave us the opportunity to understand how social actors understand themselves in relation to constantly changing life circumstances and how learning processes are related to these processes. Creativity, curiosity and ambition to discover something have always been fruitful companions in my research, as well as my capacity to reflect on research perspectives and my own position in the research process. Especially, the research in postcolonial contexts and on postcolonial narratives challenged my previous understanding of research practice and brought me to question basic assumptions within biographical research. At the same time, it made me think 'outside the box' and develop a research perspective that not only deals with individual learning processes, but also with collective learning and action, for example in social movements (see Pilch Ortega, 2018a). The resistance of postcolonial narrative data during the analysis and the exploration of differently configured social framework conditions of a postcolonial context enabled me to identify blind spots in the research and to develop a research practice that strives to adopt an appropriate and reflective research perspective. However, research is an adventurous journey where we can be fundamentally challenged but also gain profound insights that not only change our understanding of the world but also provide clues as to how it can be transformed into a more humane, democratic and sustainable world. To achieve this ambitious goal, we need patience, tolerance of frustration and a sense of humour towards ourselves, as well as creativity and a feel for current, socially important challenges.

In this article, I will focus on the question of what is unconditionally necessary for me in doing research and how to navigate it. To answer this question, I will refer to key experiences that are of great importance to me as a researcher. Based on my previous research, particularly in relation to my investigations in the highlands of Chiapas in Mexico, I will attempt to identify key elements that are essential to my research. More specifically, I will address important challenges that have fundamentally questioned and influenced my understanding of research and have been important for my development as a scientist. Against this backdrop, I will focus on doing research with postcolonial narratives and will highlight related epistemological, methodological and ethical issues I had to deal with during my research. I will discuss research in postcolonial contexts and the associated implications. Research begins with the development of a *research design*, so I will focus on some of the challenges and tricky questions at the beginning

of a research process. For me, the exploratory research attitude is also very important, as it forms the basis for understanding research as a learning process. In addition, I will highlight *data collection and analysis* as a central component of a research process. As researchers, we must make various decisions during a research process and explore the living conditions of our interviewees. Critical reflection also plays an important role in this research phase. Finally, the *presentation of research findings* within a research process should not be underestimated, as we need to consider the 'hidden dialogue' and dissemination issues to achieve impact with our research.

Focusing on postcolonial narratives: epistemological, methodological and ethical issues

Biography-oriented studies of life stories in non-European contexts and the exploration of transnational spaces and globally networked living environments are fields of research that have not only recently received increasing academic attention in biographical research. This not only raises the question of the culturally specific configuration, the socio-historical and socio-cultural embedding of life plans, but also draws attention to the complex interrelationships between local and global realities of life and the hegemonic relationships of domination, power and dependency inscribed in them. These power relations must be addressed in research to avoid the risk of reproducing problematic discourses and unquestioningly applying Eurocentric perspectives and methods that are not adequate for the specific configuration of the living environments under investigation. The effects of geopolitical power constellations and the associated tense relationship between centres and peripheries also raises fundamental questions in relation to the legitimacy of scientific representation. The interweaving of knowledge production with hegemonic power relations requires a critical reflection and further development of both the methodological and epistemological approaches of biographical research. In the current debate, attempts are increasingly being made to make references from postcolonial studies connectable and fruitful for biographical research. The postcolonial perspective is understood as a category of analysis that aims to demonstrate the lasting effectiveness of (neo-)colonial discourses and power relations and focuses on the Eurocentrism of geopolitical (knowledge) structures and the associated representation regimes (see Reuter & Villa, 2010). In this context, biographical studies can be seen as an attempt to give a voice to particularly disadvantaged and marginalised groups. However, biographical self-thematisation in the context of an interview must be understood as speaking in a hegemonic space and requires critical reflection on the procedure. Exclusionary and discriminatory discourses of the prevailing society(ies) must be critically reflected upon, as must the problem of

othering as an implicit research perspective and the theoretical and methodological approach to life histories through Eurocentric assumptions and perspectives. In this respect, postcolonial studies call for the provincialisation of European knowledge regimes and an explicit reflection of Eurocentric assumptions in social science research practice (see Reuter & Villa, 2010). For example, modernisation theories are applied relatively unquestioningly to non-European lifestyles and the universal validity of the Enlightenment is postulated as a central milestone of (European) modernity. It would therefore be problematic to frame non-European lifestyles as pre-modern, as this perspective would represent a Eurocentric view that would negate other possible historical forms outside the European line of development. Against this background, I will focus on central methodological and epistemological challenges of my study on postcolonial narratives in the highlands of Chiapas, in Mexico. In doing so, I will highlight various phases of a research process and discuss aspects that I believe are essential for research.

Developing the research design and theoretical sensitivity – challenges and tricky questions at the beginning of a research process

The first challenge for any research is to develop a research design and not only to name a social phenomenon to be investigated, but also to formulate a subject of research and a research interest. At first glance, this sounds obvious, but the identification of the subject of research and the associated research interest is already based on fundamental assumptions that need to be critically scrutinised and reflected upon. An empirical study whose research topic is located in a postcolonial context must deal with epistemological questions to a particular degree and take a reflexive look at its own speaking position, which must be taken into account in the research design. The production of knowledge can be understood here neither as neutral in the sense of an objective 'location' of speech nor as independent of social context. Rather, knowledge production is entangled in power relations that need to be critically scrutinised (see Pilch Ortega, 2018b). A central question is therefore *who* (this includes not only the environment of the researcher, but also their biographical background and perspective), *how* (*i.e.* on the basis of which research-logical procedures and the associated epistemological assumptions) and *in which context* knowledge is produced *for whom* (the scientific community is always present in the form of a 'shadow' or hidden dialogue during the research process and in the process of representation) (see Pilch Ortega, 2018b). In this context, qualitative social research speaks of the inevitability of perspective and the inevitability of interpretation. According to the 'interpretative paradigm' (see Wilson, 1973), it is assumed that social patterns of order and orientation are created in a social process through the interpretative performance of the social actors. Against this

background, neither the adoption of a neutral objective position nor the ‘neutralisation’ of (everyday) theoretical assumptions is possible. The researcher is therefore always involved in a construction process that begins with the definition of the subject of research and the chosen research perspective. In the case of research on non-European life histories, theoretical and methodological perspectives must be problematised and critically reflected upon. I will come back to this topic later and give some examples in connection with my thoughts on this subject.

Even as a student, I worked with Grounded Theory Methodology as a research style. The Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) offers the possibility of a comprehensive reflection of the different research phases during the entire process. The relationship between theoretical assumptions and empirical data is understood as a dialogue that inspires the research process and allows for changes in research focus during the process. In this way, new insights and findings gained during the analysis can flow into the ongoing research process. The research findings may challenge the initial ideas and theoretical assumptions and may require a revision of the research design. In a way, I think this is the most important sense or advantage of Grounded Theory Methodology. In addition, GTM offers a space for discovery with the aim of enabling research as a creative learning process. To get a broader and at the same time more specific view of the original research idea, it makes sense to carry out (preliminary) ethnographic field research. From the perspective of ethnography, researchers attempt to answer the question of “what is actually going on” (Hammersley, 2017) in their first field study. The main aim of the field study is, for example, to identify basic ‘logics of the field’ (see Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) that are relevant for understanding important dynamics of the social phenomenon under investigation. The field study is also part of the development of a theoretical sensitivity – the theoretical framework of a study, which is not only important for the analysis, but also for the choice of suitable methods of data collection and the selection of interview partners, for example.

To return to my research example – when researching non-European life histories, it was important for me to explore the living conditions and social dynamics of my interviewees in detail. This cannot be achieved in just a few days, as the social configurations differ greatly from European living conditions. In general terms, I consider ethnographic field investigation to be an essential part of any research process. At the same time, it was also necessary to scrutinise fundamental biographical assumptions and methodological approaches. Since I was interested in life histories, the concept of biography, which has developed based on European conditions and historical processes, had to be seen as probably problematic.

Reflection on assumptions within biography theory

Biography as a social construct refers to reflexive processes of self-thematisation, which become visible as a complex constructive achievement of social actors. Furthermore, these forms of subjective processing of social reality always provide an insight into the relationship between subjectivity and sociality. Biographical construction processes are therefore crucially linked to the social conditions within which the social actors reflexively relate to themselves and the world. In the context of biographical research, this ability of reflexive self-reference is associated with the emergence of (European) modernity. Biography was able – so the assumption – to establish itself as a new social form of knowledge (see Alheit, 2008) and as a specific mode of socialisation. In view of the structured nature of postcolonial spaces, the question also arises as to what extent the postulate of an autonomous reflexive self can also be transferred to other, non-European contexts. An individual lifestyle, as it has developed in so-called Western countries, requires a social safety net that makes it possible to free oneself from social and class ties. The establishment of a comparable social safety net can by no means be assumed in the postcolonial context analysed. For example, there is no comprehensive unemployment, healthcare or pension system, nor are there sufficient welfare state benefits to adequately cushion the social hardships of those affected. As the research results of my empirical studies in postcolonial contexts make clear, social inclusion is of fundamental, sometimes existential importance for certain groups of social actors, also to make precarious living conditions and social vulnerability manageable (see Pilch Ortega, 2018b). Social inclusion is therefore an important dimension of biographical self-thematisation. The aim was to identify different social reference patterns, also with regard to the specific structure of the social framework, and to understand them as a relevant aspect of reference for biographical construction processes. The close interweaving of a biographical 'I' with 'we' references in self-thematisation is an expression of a biographical format that has emerged in the face of socio-historical lines of development and global and transnational interdependencies. In view of the complex social relations of dependency and the emergence of new constraints, the idea of an independent subject who shapes his or her life in a self-determined way appears to be a bourgeois myth anyway. In the social context studied, the precarious social conditions became visible as socially designed cues that provoke self-thematisation against the background of experienced social vulnerability and in the face of existential threats. The shared experience of social disadvantage often formed the basis on which the social actors reflexively saw themselves as part of a group. The specific structuredness of postcolonial spaces and the associated variance of biographical formats therefore require a detailed examination of the constitutive conditions of subjectivity and their

influence on biographical construction processes. Biographical research is called upon to reflect on basic assumptions and to recognise other than typically European formats of self-thematisation as legitimate forms of articulation and lines of development in a globally networked world.

In the next section, I discuss (ethnographic) field research, which is important for research and provides important insights into the reality of the interviewees' lives. Furthermore, in postcolonial contexts, special conditions must be considered when collecting data. The heart of any qualitative research is also the data analysis, in which the critical reflection of the 'analytical glasses' and biographical assumptions already discussed must be considered. The translation of empirical data, which is necessary when conducting interviews in another language, requires special attention. In this context, I will discuss challenges and limitations of translation that were essential in the context of my research in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. The development of a translation design seems to be an essential prerequisite for being able to adequately handle the translation of empirical data. The translation of empirical data and the associated epistemological and methodological challenges are still very underexposed in qualitative research. I therefore consider it important to provide some practical insights into my research practice to highlight possible approaches and problems in the translation of empirical data.

Collecting and analysing narrative data in a postcolonial context

If one follows the understanding of Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) as a research style, the process of data collection is guided by the theoretical sensitivity developed. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1998) see this as a process aimed at generating theory – while researchers collect, analyse and code data, they decide which data should be collected next and where to find it, based on the insights already gained (see Glaser & Strauss, 1998). Data collection is therefore not random but is essentially guided by a growing theoretical sensibility. The beginning of the research process is initially characterised by a relative openness in data collection to make a broader spectrum of the research subject accessible. As the process unfolds, however, a targeted search is made for social contexts and contrasting cases that enable a more differentiated view of the developed categories. The direction that the data collection will take can therefore not be planned in advance, as Glaser and Strauss emphasise (see Glaser & Strauss, 1998). As already mentioned, biography-oriented research in postcolonial contexts requires special attention to the social conditions and dynamics in which the life histories of the interviewees are embedded. Data collection and field exploration were therefore closely interwoven in the above-mentioned example of my research in the highlands of Chiapas and required a high degree of flexibility.

Challenging conditions during an ethnographic field investigation

During my ethnographic field investigation in the highlands of Chiapas, I often spent many weeks in various indigenous villages, also to gain an insight into everyday life and important dynamics of the social realities. The research area required a high degree of flexibility in the research situations. As a researcher, I was repeatedly confronted with situations in which it was necessary to deviate from the planned procedure and to critically and reflectively modify fundamental approaches. The high level of militarisation in the region where I was researching and the presence of violent conflicts made access difficult and required good planning in advance. In addition, power relations and hierarchies in the social sphere must be taken into account in research, and it seems essential for researchers to be aware of their embedding in a hierarchical structure. This fact must be considered both when conducting an interview and during participant observation. Due to the socio-political situation, establishing a relationship of trust and assuring anonymity are also crucial. For example, I also interviewed social protest activists who could be threatened by repressive measures in view of the socio-political situation. The members of a resistance movement must also obtain the consent of the movement to pass on information, and that takes time. The research stays in marginalised areas proved to be particularly valuable for the research process, because it is one thing to deal theoretically with precarious living conditions, discrimination and repressive attacks, but quite another to experience them directly and at first hand. In this context, I was confronted several times with situations in which neither medical care nor sufficient food and clean water were available in acute emergency situations. It also gives an impression of what it means to be confronted with threats from paramilitary activities in everyday life. The participation in a '*guardia*', a watch organised by the villagers for protection, can be mentioned here as an example. In this sense, one can also speak of precarious conditions for data collection, which are difficult to compare with other research situations, in a double sense: On the one hand, this involves research into precarious living conditions, which are characterised by high social vulnerability, and on the other hand the framework conditions of the field research itself, which are also associated with a (health) risk for the researchers that should not be underestimated (see Pilch Ortega, 2018b).

As part of the study '*Learning processes of social movement(s). Biographical learning dispositions in dealing with experiences of social inequality*'¹ (see Pilch Ortega, 2018b), a total of 42 narrative-biographical interviews were conducted with various social actors in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. For the empirical survey, it was important to

¹ Title in German: „Lernprozessen sozialer Bewegung(en). Biographische Lerndispositionen in Auseinandersetzung mit Erfahrungen sozialer Ungleichheit“ (Pilch Ortega, 2018b)

consider that 30 of the interviewees speak an indigenous language as their first language (Tzotzil, Tzeltal and Zoque). The interviews themselves were conducted in Spanish. Being able to articulate yourself adequately in this second language was therefore a basic precondition for conducting the interviews. As the researcher, I decided to conduct and translate the interviews myself. I therefore did not use professional translators. In the following, I will take a closer look at the challenge associated with the complexity of translation processes.

Translation of empirical data: Possibilities and limitations

Dealing with narrative data that is transferred from one language to another requires not only specific knowledge of the respective languages, but also comprehensive hermeneutic knowledge to be able to transfer meanings from one context of meaning to another with sufficient sensitivity. The culture-specific configuration and the socio-historical and socio-cultural embedding of the interview partners' life plans must be adequately considered. It seems essential to recognise that narratives are fluid and unstable entities (so the assumption), which only develop their meaning through interpretation and elude simple interpretation (see Prunč, 2000). It therefore seems particularly important to develop a sufficient sensitivity for the complex translation process and to clarify important questions about the translation strategy in advance, taking into consideration the primary research interest and the respective methodological approach. Translation is by no means to be understood as a neutral process that can be carried out objectively based on normative criteria. Rather, translation activity is interwoven into hegemonic power relations and requires sensitivity in the attribution and transfer of meanings.

Normative approaches to translation and the associated assumption of equivalence between languages have become increasingly questionable, as the academic discussion of critical translation studies makes clear (see Prunč, 2000). The assertion of equivalence between source text and translation has always been part of controversial debates within translation studies. In particular, the idea that a translation can reproduce the 'original' 1:1 has been rightly rejected. Especially with the introduction of Scopus theory into the discussion, the source text of a translation experienced a certain form of dethronement in translation studies. Katharina Reiss and Hans Vermeer (1991) regard translation as an 'offer of information' for a specific socio-cultural target context, whereby translators are understood as interpreters or recipients among many (see Prunč, 2007). Starting from a hermeneutic and relational perspective on translation, Paul Ricoeur (2006) argues for going beyond a purely linguistic approach to translation and emphasises the impossibility of a perfect translation. For him, texts are not just words on a page, but expressions of "different visions of the world" (Ricoeur, 2006: 31), whereby it is not just what someone says that matters, but how something is said (see Mulayim & Lai,

2017). Ricoeur's (2006) critique of literal translations also emphasises the resistance of translators who venture into 'dangerous areas' beyond the idea of language equivalence to explore the meaning of different rhythms and pauses between words.

They gave up the comfortable shelter of the equivalence of meaning, and ventured into hazardous areas where there would be some talk of tone, of savour, of rhythm, of spacing, of silence between the words, of metrics and of rhyme (Ricoeur, 2006: 38).

He also points out that translations are always associated with a loss of meaning that must be accepted. In general terms, translation activity is seen as part of the research process, in the context of which important decisions must be made (see Levý, 1981). This is not just about the question of what exactly is to be translated, but also about the how of the translation, the translation strategy and the translation context (see Pilch Ortega, 2018b). The complex decisions that must be made during a translation cannot be made independently of the respective goal of a translation, the translation contexts involved and the associated power and domination relationships. Since, in my opinion, translators play a decisive role in the creation of a new text, the decisions should be made transparently, and the aim and purpose of the translation should be disclosed. The decision to orientate oneself comprehensively on the source text and stay as close as possible to the text must be put to the test, as must the targeted modification of a source text to counteract possible hegemonic patterns of interpretation. As the discourse in critical translation studies makes clear, it is not possible to determine a priori what constitutes a good or bad translation. Rather, the evaluation of a translation is linked to a social negotiation process that takes place based on different translation conventions (see Prunč, 2000).

Due to the multilingual language area of the research, a translation design was developed for the above-mentioned study in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. Within this framework, both the function and the objective of the translation were clarified in relation to the research interest and the methodological approach of biographical research. Based on the examination of critical discourses in translation studies, it seemed essential to visualise the translation process as a decision-making process and make it comprehensible. The examination of critical approaches in translation studies, particularly the questioning of the possibility of linguistic equivalence relationships, was particularly beneficial for me – also regarding implicit normative assumptions and patterns of interpretation.

To make the translation process transparent, a bilingual presentation of the core passages from the interviews was chosen in this study. In this way, the translation of the Spanish-language transcripts of the interviews was made comprehensible. It should be noted that my analysis of the narratives was based on the Spanish-language primary texts; the translations of the core passages served primarily to make the empirical data

accessible to a German-speaking readership. In the context of a biography-theoretical study, the translation process can be described as an interpretative search movement within which one moves back and forth between the socio-cultural and linguistic contexts with the intention of linguistically articulating and transferring interpretative constructions of meaning (see Pilch Ortega, 2018b). The translation process already requires an analytical approach and can be regarded as an 'intermediate result' in the analysis process, which already provides important insights into the complex construction processes of social actors. The complex translation steps can be compared with a comprehensive line-by-line analysis. Narratives and textual content are systematically 'broken up' and contrasting readings are developed, which in turn must be substantiated by the specific text passages. The practice (common in biographical research) of writing structural descriptions of the core passages offers the opportunity to provide different (sometimes contradictory) translation versions and to adequately problematise and comment on them. A translation process, especially in connection with narrative interviews, is very time-consuming. The first translation is usually a rough draft that can be refined and modified in subsequent steps. However, there are also limits to the translatability of narratives in terms of the complexity of meanings in linguistic expression.

The communicative power of the structural analysis

Finally, I would like to make a few comments on the (structural) analysis within the biographically orientated studies. As already mentioned, analysing the empirical data is at the heart of any qualitative research and requires critical reflection on the 'analytical glasses' and background knowledge of the researchers. Gerhard Riemann and Fritz Schütze (1987) emphasise above all the communicative character of structural analysis, which requires a categorical understanding of the data. Thomas Reim and Gerhard Riemann (1997) mention in this context that the effectiveness of the central activities of data analysis can be increased by allowing them to unfold in the interaction of a working group. The qualitative data is therefore usually analysed in the context of research workshops or interpretation groups to support the communicative and interactive dynamics. Research workshops in which empirical data is jointly interpreted already have a long tradition in German-speaking countries. The first research workshops in German-speaking countries were organised in the second half of the 1970s by Werner Kallmeyer and Fritz Schütze, among others. Their further development was decisively influenced by Anselm Strauss' style of research and training.

The primary aim of this analytic approach is not only to reproduce the discursively available data in terms of content, but also to break it up structurally. When analysing narrative interviews, for example, a line-by-line analysis (in the sense of open coding) is first used to develop as many contrasting readings as possible, initially without regard

to their consistency of content, to explore meanings and interpretatively reconstruct the perspective of the narrator and the narrative (see Pilch Ortega, 2020a). The line-by-line analysis is a careful discussion of “how the quoted person has used individual words, phrases and sentences” (Strauss, 2004: 170). Strauss (2004) mentions that it encourages researchers “to examine the data microscopically” and “to listen closely to what the interviewees are saying and how they are saying it” (Strauss, 2004: 173). Even if the line-by-line analysis is very time-consuming and labour-intensive, it helps to discover initial categories and to describe properties and dimensions on a more abstract level. It also helps to think about problematic discourses, implicit assumptions and knowledge. In the next step, the developed categories are organised around a ‘theoretical axis’ with the help of a comparative analysis based on characteristics and properties, until core categories for a subject area are finally identified and elaborated. Another feature of the grounded theory methodology, which is also applied here, is that the survey and analysis phases are linked. Based on the current state of knowledge, contrasting cases are specifically sought in order to further condense and abstract the developed categories. Theory and empiricism are thus engaged in an intensive dialogue.

In the above-mentioned study in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico, the narrative-biographical interviews were conducted in Spanish. At this point, it should also be noted that the analysis process was organised in different settings. I personally used the Spanish-language transcripts for the analysis. In addition to the bilingual presentation of the results, the translation of the interviews also served to make the interview material accessible to my colleagues in a group of interpreters, who supported me in analysing key passages. The ‘Lesart’ research group at our department in Graz was an important resource and a corrective for creating readings that are as diverse and rich in contrast as possible. Within the research group, not only did an individual style of interpretation develop, but the members also have comprehensive theoretical and methodological knowledge in dealing with narrative-biographical interviews. In addition, the research collaborations with academics from the social field under investigation were used to discuss and reflect critically on the readings developed (see Pilch Ortega, 2020b). I think this is particularly important when it comes to analysing postcolonial narratives.

***(Re)Presentation of research findings –
the question of legitimacy of the representation of others***

The final step in a research project is the presentation of the research results. The writing up and presentation of the research results should not be underestimated as a separate work step. As scientists, we claim a privileged position of speaking, which requires a special ethical and critical-reflective attitude in dealing with research results. In this respect, science also acts as a provider of interpretation for society. This addresses

another dilemma of research, namely speaking about others, which seems to be particularly problematic in postcolonial contexts that are researched from a 'European' perspective. It therefore seems essential not only to deal carefully with questions of power asymmetry and representation in the sense of speaking about others, but also to analyse the political dimension of research findings. Paul Mecheril (2003) speaks of the act of 'objectifying inscription'² regarding the defining power of academic work. Scientific statements and patterns of interpretation thus attain validity in the hegemonic space and have a power of definition that does not leave the 'described' untouched. Scientific findings thus also find their way into the self-perception of social actors and their everyday practical assumptions. However, the process of inscription must also be understood as a process of appropriation, which not only refers to stubborn construction processes, but also opens possibilities for contradiction and dissent.

Against this background, an ethical and political responsibility can also be derived for those who have a privileged place to speak and produce knowledge about 'others'. However, the production of knowledge, even if it claims to critically and reflectively address power and domination relations, remains bound to the context in which it is produced (see Pilch Ortega, 2018b). According to a social science understanding, insights are understood as 'second-order constructions' that are based on 'first-order constructions' (see Schütz, 1971) of everyday patterns of order. The researcher has the task of analytically visualising latent structures of meaning in social orientations. The position taken is also an expression of a privileged view of social structures of meaning that science (as claimed) can provide, whereby the question of the legitimacy of representation remains open or is part of the social negotiation process. In contrast to the practice of objectifying the other, Mecheril (2003) developed the proposal of 'speaking about the speaking of subjects'³. He describes the associated research practice as 'modelling', within which 'interview texts are translated into interpretation texts'⁴ (see Mecheril, 2003: 32). He understands the process of translation as transformation, which 'leaves behind the place where it takes its starting point to finally arrive at another place where the process could only arrive because it took its starting point at the other place'⁵ (Mecheril, 2003: 32).

Mecheril's (2003) reflections were significant for my research in the highlands of Chiapas insofar as the aspect of the construction of something new, beyond the claim of

² The original quote in German: „objektivierende Einschreibung“ (Mecheril, 2003: 33).

³ The original quote in German: „Sprechen-Über das Sprechen der Subjekte“ (Mecheril, 2003: 32)

⁴ The original quote in German: „Modellieren“, innerhalb dessen „Interviewtexte in Interpretationstexte“ übersetzt werden (Mecheril, 2003: 32)

⁵ The original quote in German: „der den Ort, an dem er seinen Ausgangspunkt nimmt, hinter sich lässt, um schließlich an einem anderen Ort anzukommen, an dem der Vorgang nur ankommen konnte, weil er an dem je anderen Ort seinen Ausgangspunkt nahm“ (Mecheril, 2003: 32).

objectifying representation, was to be taken up. Accordingly, my empirical investigation has detached itself from the claim of representation. In addition, reference is made to the concept of translation, whereby the idea of transferring something from one place to another is not pursued here. Rather, the above-mentioned study is based on the understanding that the difference as well as the existing similarities between the 'places' create a relational space that opens a horizon of knowledge, which makes the perspective as well as the implicit assumptions of the observer visible in the act of observation and is able to utilise them as a potential for knowledge. The observed subject becomes the observer of the observer (see Pilch Ortega, 2018b). Against this background, the 'analytical view' and the approach reveal just as much about the researcher himself as about the social structures of interpretation in which he is embedded. By interpreting, we reveal a lot about ourselves, even if we are not always aware of this during the process. In this sense, the empirical study is an attempt to utilise the relational space created by the discrepancy in perspectives as an opportunity to generate insights that can be located neither here nor there. Following Homi Bhabha (2011; 2012), this ambiguity can also be understood as a "third space", and used as an opportunity to liquefy existing assumptions, irritate one's own perspectives and generate new insights in the sense of a discovering research attitude. This is about the idea of reflexive accessibility, including normative orientations of origin and professional habitus, in that 'blind spots' can be made visible and uncovered by analysing the empirical data, whereby one's own perspectivity is always considered.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, I have dealt with the question of what is absolutely essential for me in research and how to navigate it. To answer this question, I have tried to identify key experiences in my career as a researcher that have had a decisive influence on me. Especially, my research in postcolonial contexts has led me to many limits of my understanding of science and helped me to explore new paths and to further develop my original attitude as a researcher. Thinking about the question of the legitimacy of scientific (re-)presentation, for example, was an important turning point for my understanding of research. But the ability of postcolonial narratives to elude clear interpretation was also helpful for me in shaking up my understanding of research and developing new perspectives. What has stayed with me to this day is my passion for research, my enquiring curiosity and the creativity that can unfold in the face of challenging research situations. The precondition for this is critical reflexivity as a key element of all research, which also requires sufficient time and space to develop. The dimension of time is probably one of the most important research resources that has

not yet been mentioned in this article. The current framework conditions in research do not allow for creativity and the joy of discovery due to a lack of time resources. Research under the current circumstances takes place under immense time pressure and in the form of a serious quantitative production constraint (see Pilch Ortega, 2020b). I am also writing this article under great time pressure. This makes the resource of time and space the most important asset of research, research that also enables us to delve deeper into social issues and realities to find new topics and answers. Important questions that I have repeatedly asked myself during my research work are: Does research really have an impact? Does it change the world for the better? My answer to this is: I hope that research can make a difference. However, in view of current dramatic global developments, we need creative research more than ever.

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