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Self-reflective Ethnographies of Practice and their Relevance for Professional Socialisation in Social Work*

Gerhard Riemann

The article tries to explicate and illustrate a type of qualitative practitioner research in the field of professional training and to shed light on its practical uses for the acquisition of analytical skills and the fostering of professional discourse. The discussion is based on the author's work with social work students who are encouraged and supported to become "ethnographers of their own affairs", especially in the context of their practice placements, which are a mandatory part of their social work course. By presenting and discussing students' ethnographic field notes and a sequence of a student's oral narrative (along with their retrospective reflections) he attempts to convey how such a style of researching one's own practice can contribute to student apprentices' personal acquisition of skills for the analysis of individual and collective cases. This type of work could also become significant for collective concerns of the profession, e.g. with regard to generating a research based, self-critical and case specific professional discourse on possible problematic tendencies of professional work and the discovery of alternatives of action, but also with regard to the emergence of a self-confident and innovative type of research which is carried out by professional practitioners themselves.

Key words: ethnography, social work, professional self-reflection, professional discourse, professional socialisation

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1. Introduction

What I would like to do in this article[1] is to present and discuss excerpts from ethnographic research of some students of social work in order to sensitise readers to the possible uses of such work for the acquisition of professional skills and for the professional project of social work in general. The ethnographic research of the students is about something which they had encountered, also in themselves, in the course of their own practice placements. Therefore I call it "self-reflective". I hope that I don't appear immodest when referring to the work of some of my own students and to the respective learning environments. I just cannot write about someone else's students since I don't know them.

There are quite a few colleagues who are engaged in the training of future social workers (in Germany and other countries) who might tell you similar things about the qualitative research of their own students. What we have in common is the conviction that the professionalisation of students of social work could profit a lot from their becoming familiar with different approaches of interpretive research and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. This has to do with strong affinities between practical professional and social scientific "case orientations": Social workers and interpretive researchers alike try to understand the development of individual and collective cases. Early protagonists of the professionalisation project of social work, like Mary Richmond (1922), understood very clearly how professional case work and case analysis had to be based on a circumspect use of interpretive social scientific research procedures,[2] in order to avoid the risk of turning it into a superficial, stifling and bureaucratic routine. Students in departments

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1 The article is based on a paper which I presented at a DANASWAC meeting at the University of Utrecht on June 16, 2011, and on a lecture at the Goethe Institute of Porto Alegre on June 21, 2011, which was delivered in the context of a Symposium on Action and Participatory Research in Porto Alegre (from June 20 to 22, 2011).

2 Of course without confounding the nature of professional work with its specific time pressure, responsibilities and constraints of decision making with possibly far-reaching consequences for clients, on the one hand, and academic research, which is relieved of such pressures, on the other hand. The sociological complexity of Mary Richmond's case analysis has been discussed by Riemann and Schütze (2012).

of social work or full-fledged social workers and other professionals, too, could find it useful, e.g., to see how sociologists and other social scientists go about conducting and analysing autobiographical narrative interviews, how conversational analysts or sociolinguists find order in conversations or how ethnographers approach and get acquainted with cultures which they had not known before. Becoming familiar with this research might have consequences for their own way to communicate, to listen and to analyse, more patiently and without quickly subsuming people under powerful, elegant and prestigious diagnoses. Social scientists, too, could find it interesting to learn about features of practical case analyses in social work or to discover quasi ethnographic competences of social workers, e.g., street workers, in their dealing with different social worlds and milieus, even though social workers often don't know themselves that they have such competencies, or don't make a great fuss about it. Sometimes it would be better if they were a little more outspoken about the fact that they have such competencies. I will return to this point at the end of my paper.

There have been quite a few persuasive statements about the affinities of practical professional and social scientific "case orientations", about the need to integrate reconstructive or qualitative research in social work training and about interesting teaching and learning experiences in this context (Schütze 1994; Jakob/v. Wensierski 1997; Giebeler et al. 2007; Dausien et al. 2008; Völter 2008; Inowlocki et al. 2010). A recent project (Betts et al. 2008), e.g., made a strong plea for the acquisition of skills of narrative analysis in the context of biographical counselling and the professional support of biographical work (in the sense of Strauss 1993: 97-106) among people who had experienced deep crises with failing bodies, and undergo a process of occupational rehabilitation.

I won't go into details here, but would just like to mention that it is not a matter of course to create conditions in social work courses on the bachelor and master level which foster a climate for doing such kind of work. Such endeavors should not be marginalised as "irrelevant" or a mere "freestyle event" and have to appear plausible and worthwhile to staff and students. There must be a "curricular space" and time rhythms which allow for or even encourage this work, something which cannot be taken for granted in many

European social work departments in "times of Bologna". It is not always easy to work with students who have developed certain learning styles, dispositions and expectations, depending on the milieu and the basic assumptions of their departments: They might have developed a need for "evidence based" practice programmes, which can be easily implemented (at least that is the promise), or for propositional knowledge, which can be easily "checked" in their exams. They might have become disciples of an influential master theory or ideology of practice which gives them a false sense of security or "professionalism". They might have become very strategic in the use of their scarce time resources (especially if there are many disparate modules which they have to cope with). They might have convinced themselves that research "belongs" to professors and not to them (to quote a student). But all of this notwithstanding, many colleagues (including me) think it makes sense to try to create conditions for qualitative research of social work students in our local departments.

I want to discuss two types of student research which have developed in my own work at the Department of Social Work in the University of Bamberg (from 1997 to 2007) and the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Georg Simon Ohm University of Applied Sciences in Nuremberg (from 2007 until today). What these types have in common is a close link to student experiences of practice placements or other experiences of professional practice (beyond official placements). The idea is to encourage students to make their own practice strange and to create learning environments in which this can be achieved. I think that a very promising and rewarding type of research of social work students derives from a self-reflection of their own practice.[3] At the end of my article readers will hopefully be able to decide for themselves what this approach has in common with, and how it differs from, the work

[3] That means, too, that the often invoked alternative between making a course of social work "more practical" or "more theoretical" is totally misleading. One can make it more demanding and academically challenging by integrating more serious "practice components" which generate material for self-reflection and analysis. If the introduction of bachelor courses has been brought about by the reduction of time spent in practice placements (as it has been the case in Germany) this has been a step in the wrong direction.

which is usually subsumed under the concept of participatory action research. I will return to this point at the end of my discussion.

2. Examples of self-reflective social work research of students

2.1 The work with ethnographic field notes[4]

Before I present and discuss some excerpts from students' reports (field notes and reflective commentaries) I would like to shortly refer to the conditions and social arrangements which have developed in this context (see Riemann 2005, 2006, 2010; White/Riemann 2010).

Suggesting the idea to students of social work that writing field notes about their own professional practice makes sense, and is a worthwhile endeavour, often provokes some initial scepticism. Many of them have learned that writing in an academic context should be something impersonal and neutral, and that the use of the first person of the personal pronoun ("I") should be avoided at all costs; they often depreciate personal field notes as "merely subjective" and therefore dubious material.[5] Sometimes they feel that they don't have anything special to tell to the world: aren't they just students or student apprentices? They should just stick to learning the ropes of becoming a competent practitioner. What is the point in acquiring an attitude of wondering and of not taking anything for granted (as a mental precondition for writing down ethnographic field notes), if it is strenuous enough in the first place to gain ground in their local work environment, i.e., to learn the necessary routines and to acquire the appropriate terminology for all practical purposes? Sometimes they have to acquire skills in writing files, and such a writing style is not exactly what is encouraged in writing ethnographic field notes.

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[4] I wish to thank Margit Wrba, Elisabeth Koller and Cosimo Mangione, former students of the diploma course in the (now defunct) Department of Social Work at the University of Bamberg, for the possibility to use excerpts from their ethnographic reports.

[5] Milieus of social work training in different countries might differ in this regard though (as was pointed out to me by Carol van Nijnatten of the University of Utrecht). I have to rely on my experience of teaching in some German departments.

Students only lose their insecurity and their reservations if they start to make observations and write down their field notes in a process of "learning by doing", if they make their texts (of course with due regard to the preservation of anonymity) accessible to others (including the instructor), especially in the context of seminars of practice analysis, in which students take turns to discuss their field notes, and if they receive personal feedback on their notes. But it also makes sense to inform them about some elements of ethnographic writing which have proved useful in this context.[6] I advise students, e.g.:

– to write for a sympathetic audience (in this case an audience of peers) who they assume are not familiar with the procedures and social contexts of the relevant field of practice, and to present their observations in such a way that it is possible for outside readers to analyse the text by themselves;

– to focus on sequences for the sake of discovering the order, but also the disorder of social processes. The disorder could consist in the violation of interactional reciprocity, and in breaches and irritations of sequences of action and communication;

– to take into account, and to differentiate between, their own inner states and perspectives at different times (as actors in the former situation and later on when writing down and reflecting about their observations);

– to differentiate the perspectives of different actors and to forgo the tendency to privilege certain, e.g., official and prestigious, perspectives: a tendency which is often encouraged when students have become familiar with (and are "under the spell of") the language of psychiatry or other au-

[6] For a long time the skills of writing ethnographic field notes were primarily passed on orally in the respective academic milieus in sociology and cultural anthropology. It has just become a topic in the literature of cultural anthropology in the last two decades (e.g., Sanjek (ed.) 1990). With regard to the sociological literature on field research especially the work of Emerson et al. (1995) contains useful suggestions for writing field notes. It would also be worthwhile to take into account the literature on "learning journals" (cf. Moon 2006) which has become important in professional socialisation in the UK and other countries.

thoritative terminologies which promise to introduce order into a seemingly chaotic part of the social reality;

– to differentiate the language of the field from their own observational language.

Students take turns in presenting their field notes in a seminar of practice analysis in which their material is discussed and analysed. The field notes which they present clearly focus on certain events: e.g., the first encounter with the field of practice; professional schemes of action like counselling sessions, therapies, intake interviews, clinical rounds and team meetings; the history of the relationship with a client; recurring everyday routines in an institution etc.. The participants of the seminar take time to work on the field notes at home (after having received an electronic version in time) and in the seminar, i.e., they segment them and make comments on them.

After discussing and assessing the features and textual validity of the field notes participants share their overall impression of the data, and then engage in joint microscopic work on certain sequences, which can primarily be understood as "open coding" as described by Anselm Strauss (1987: 28). The participants

– focus on the structure of social contexts, conditions and processes, the perspectives of different interaction partners, the central problems and paradoxes of professional work as they are visible in the data (Schütze 1992, 1996, 2000; Riemann 2000) and practitioners' ways of coping with them;

– identify the experiences, interpretations and dispositions of the fellow student, who had distributed her data, as they are revealed in the material (experiences and interpretations during the depicted events and at the time of the writing); and

– formulate elements of a non-normative criticism of the observed practice, be it the practice of the student writer or the practice of other interaction partners who appear in the field notes, and suggest possible alternatives of action.

In our seminars of practice analysis, written field notes are never taken at face value in a naïve way, but they are critically analysed: Is there a certain lack of plausibility in the way in which the writer reconstructs events and experiences? What about the observational foci, the categories, interpretations, evaluations and possible blind spots of the student writer? It is important that addressing such issues happens respectfully. Such a considerate style is also encouraged by the system of turn-taking (every participant is expected to present her own field notes and should be treated with respect by everyone else). These texts disclose a lot about the particular student writer as a future professional, but they are also an important basis for understanding and reflecting processes of professional socialisation in general.

The student who has shared her material makes a written summary on the basis of the (primarily oral) feedback of the other participants of the seminar. This summary serves as a basis for her further work on the field notes which finally leads to an ethnographic report. The participants of the seminar support each other while they gradually produce their ethnographic final reports, i.e., they discuss outlines and excerpts of their reports, and examine if the structure of the work in progress does justice to the specifics of the experience of the respective student ethnographers, and whether or not the things which appear especially interesting in the data are sufficiently explored.

I would like to present and discuss excerpts from three ethnographic texts, which social work students in Bamberg produced.

Getting to know the work in a public health department

This is a small excerpt from the final report of a student of social work, Margit Wrba, who had spent a few weeks during her short term practice placement in the public health department of a rural county in Southern Germany. The following excerpt consists of (a) extracts of her sequential field notes[7] on a certain event and (b) her retrospective reflections in which she also uses ideas of our seminar discussion on her field notes. The public

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[7] The field notes are *italicised* and put in quotation marks. Later excerpts from reports of other students will be presented in the same way. I translated all excerpts from student reports (field notes and retrospective reflections) from the German.

health officer had asked her to accompany him on a home visit of two old single peasant women and sisters, both of them over eighty years old, who still manage their small farm by themselves.[8] The public health officer had been commissioned by the court to examine whether or not a guardianship order should be installed for Roswitha M., the younger one of the two sisters. The ambulant nursing service, which takes care of Roswitha M., had suggested a guardianship, but without informing her about this idea. During the home visit the doctor leaves them in the dark about who had come up with this idea: At the beginning of their conversation they ask him several times, but he does not inform them about who initiated this inquiry in the first place.

> *"The doctor turns to Mrs. Roswitha M. and asks her to answer a few questions. I notice that he asks questions from a standardised test in order to clarify if she has a dementia. He asks her to name the day, the month, and the year. After thinking about it for a little while she answers all three questions correctly. Then he shows her his hand – five fingers stretched out – and wants to know how many fingers she sees. She starts to giggle, turns to her sister who also giggles already and says,'The boy thinks we are not able to count until five anymore.' (The local Southern German dialect is used in the quote, G.R.). The doctor and I have to laugh, too. The women are not angry with us at all, but invite him to continue with this 'rubbish'. I had seen several times how the doctor had conducted the test, but now it's the first time that I realize how stupid the questions have to appear to a 'healthy person'. She does not have any problems answering the other questions from the test, i.e., a senile dementia can be excluded."*

I think that it would have been possible in the context of an informal conversation to find out if the woman has a dementia or not. Of course this would have taken somewhat more time and it wouldn't have been possible to nicely tick off the questions in the fixed order. But I question how

[8] The student writes at the beginning of her field notes about this event: "The public health officer had asked me if I would like to join him for doing a medical assessment. I agree right away – I enjoy the fact that he wants me to accompany him and doesn't regard my presence as a nuisance. Today it's a visit with two old ladies in which I might be 'helpful'. He says that he has had the experience that it is better in some cases if a woman is present. He feels that (in these cases) the situation is often more relaxed."

> meaningful such tests are. E.g., it could be totally unimportant for the woman to know the name of the day, since the daily schedules resemble each other and her sister could call her attention to important events. Of course the test consists of many differently loaded questions. Nevertheless one shouldn't accept the test result as a matter of course. It makes sense to consider alternative explanations (except dementia) why a question was not answered correctly or was not answered at all.
>
> I also find Mrs. Roswitha M.'s reaction interesting. When the doctor asks her how many fingers she sees she talks to her sister about the doctor and calls him a "boy". I.e., she brings age categories into play and puts her life experience above the doctor's expert knowledge. By doing so she reverses the hierarchy and questions the doctor's competence. When she jokes with her sister the seriousness of the situation and the test gets lost. I mentioned in my field notes that they were not angry with us and that the doctor could continue administering the test. But another turn of events might have been possible: She could have experienced the question as an insult, or as an assumption of mental incapacity and could have declined to continue the conversation. But, by making a funny commentary, she playfully suspends the test as a serious activity.

The student expresses very clearly that she is aware of the virtuosity of the old lady, who turns the tables on the doctor, after he had doubted her intellectual abilities (and this was noticeable for her) and performed a test. Putting the tables on him means transforming him into an object of her spontaneous degradation ceremony (Garfinkel 1956). She plays along, passes the test and reveals its absurdity at the same time. She does not do so under protest but in a friendly subversive way, displaying the humour of an "old woman" who laughs together with her sister ("we") about the "boy" without endangering the basis of interaction. The "boy" and the student join in their laughter, the "master status" (Everett Hughes) of a medical doctor is temporarily suspended. The field notes show how the student differentiated perspectives and carefully explicated the viewpoint of the old lady and her communicative style.

Participating in inner city streetwork

The following excerpt is taken from the beginning part of the diploma thesis of a Bamberg student of social work, Elisabeth Koller, who wrote an empiri-

cal study "on the life histories of punks and on aspects of street work in the punk scene" (2003): both an ethnography and a biographical analysis. In the beginning of her study she presents detailed field notes of how she went on a walk together with two social workers through a part of this big city in Southern Germany which is the home territory of the local punk scene. (These field notes are combined with reflective commentaries like in the two other examples.)[9] When she wrote her field notes she had already been on a practice placement in this project for several months. The project is offered by the local youth welfare office and focuses on adolescents and young adults who have their territory in the streets of the inner city and around the central station, e.g. homeless youths and runaway kids. Most clients belong to the punk scene.

> *"It is a beautiful late afternoon, the sun is shining and it is pleasantly warm outside. We have finished our team discussion and have decided to go on a walk today – the three of us: Sonja and Tristan, the two social pedagogues of the street work project, and me. I am already looking forward to finally get outside."*
>
> It is noticeable here right away that one does not just have irregular and unusual times and places of work as a street worker, but that one is especially sensitised to the weather during a working day. The weather and the seasons play an important role for the day-to-day of working: on the one hand, since you (as a professional in this field) are exposed to the vicissitudes of weather yourself and walk on the street in order to locate the clients, regardless of whether or not it is hot, rainy, windy and cold, whether or not there is ice and snow; on the other hand, the weather also influences the contacts with the clients. If the weather is bad, one only meets few people, since they might not have come into the city in the first place or have looked for other and more protected places. If the weather is bad the clients are often grumpy, because they are freezing, the clothes is damp or their "scrounging" is not very successful. Oftentimes the bad weather not

[9] In the end of this chapter she also spells out some central problems of professional street work which she could discover in these field notes, e.g. the tensions between conflicting requirements of social workers' action schemes and the perennial question which problems have to be tackled first (in dealing with a certain case) and which ones are temporarily regarded as secondary.

only depresses the street workers and clients, but also the "sponsors" of the "scroungers".

The weather also affects the number of visitors in the drop-in centre: Usually less people show up during the summer months, it is well known that punks are mobile "folk" and fond of travelling.[10] Many travel to other cities, meet outside etc. But during winter and bad weather the young people are very glad that they have a warm place where they can stay, so that they show up in great numbers.

"The windows are wide open and I can look out of the office right on the pedestrian zone. (The office is located in a multi-storied building in the inner city of A-town.) Then I hear a loud barking of dogs down in the street. This arouses my curiosity right away. I look out of the window wondering if I know the dogs, that is to say dogs of punks. But I don't see anything exciting except for the regular pedestrian traffic and two quite "normal" dogs. They sniff at each other after they had barked excitedly in the beginning, their tails fawning."

I would like to note that I paid attention to the barking of the dogs, since the dogs, too, have a place in the work with punks that should not be neglected. Many punks have dogs, and they are an emotional source of support for the young people in their often desolate everyday life. They are especially stabilising in times of crisis.

You are in the young people's "good books" right away if you let them know that you like animals. This gave me an "advantage" immediately at the beginning of my practice placement. The social workers already wanted to know during my job interview if I like dogs and was not afraid of them, since one does not just deal with the punks, but also often with their "animal escorts". Since I had grown up on a farm I did not expect any problems whatsoever in this regard. The topic of "dogs" or generally "animals" also provides an excellent opportunity to start a conversation with many punks. This mutual interest contributes a lot to a good relationship.

When I hear the loud barking of dogs I also associate this with potential trouble: Dogs can create problems for their owners, our clients, because of

[10] In German: "Die Punks sind ja bekanntlich ein mobiles reiselustiges 'Völkchen'." The term "Völkchen" – the diminutive of „Volk" - sounds affectionate and amused. I find it somewhat difficult to find an adequate English term.

different reasons, especially since many of them have not obtained insurance for their dogs: It might happen that a "punk dog" clashes with another dog and bites. Or a dog hurts a passer-by, since the owner is too drunk or drugged up[11] to keep him or her under control any more.

The animals often produce stress for the street workers, e.g. in the drop-in centre. On certain days there were fifteen dogs (whole families of dogs) in the institution, at other times between five and ten. And since the sweet little animals don't always get along with each other, the workers have to link them with their owners first of all, and distribute them in the different rooms. Then one has to take care that the doors stay closed, and one has to remind people of that all the time. The workers have to be tolerant or have to be willing to clean the mess up, if dogs cannot wait any longer to be taken out for a walk, if they have diarrhoea or vomit. (One has to attend to spray "disinfectants against the identification marks of male dogs" in order to prevent dogs pissing anew on sofas and door frames.) In rare cases workers even witness "dog fights", and then attempt together with the owners to smooth things down.

I think I could write a whole chapter about the "indirect client dog", so many things come to my mind. But I would finally like to get out on the street.

"Before we start I put still a few useful things to go into my shoulder bag: tampons, condoms and handkerchiefs. Sonja always carries dressing material along, adhesive tape and disinfectants, for the young people who sometimes hurt themselves, but also often for a wounded dog's paw or (small) bites. (....)"

In retrospect, the student wonders about her own perceptions and relevancies as they become visible in her field notes and tries to shed light on why her notes include references to the weather and the sound of barking dogs. Thereby her associative reflections turn into further descriptive explications of her experiential knowledge as a street worker. It can be nicely seen how "inscribing" memories of the unfolding of a situation gradually contributes to a heightened awareness of relevancies and practices which are usually taken for granted in everyday work routines. One can notice a tone of slight

[11] The student uses a folk term ("dicht" = "dense"), which is common in the social world of drug users and refers to different – alcohol or drug induced - states of intoxication.

amusement in her description: the lively presentation of punk dogs as "indirect clients" and of what this means for the work of social workers etc., but the subject matter is marked as something serious nevertheless (cf. her reference to the biographical significance of the dogs for their owners). In other parts of her study the student also reveals that she has a lot of sensibility for biographical trajectories of suffering (Schütze 1995; Riemann/Schütze 1991) among members of the punk scene.

Becoming familiar with a home for the elderly

The student who wrote down the following field notes and retrospective reflections, Cosimo Mangione, had spent three years working as a "semi-skilled" aide in a nursing home for the elderly and in a clinic before becoming a student of social work. His specialisation in a certain field of social work practice also included a short term placement for a couple of weeks, which he spent in a home for the elderly again. Returning to this field of work was not exactly his first choice but more or less a matter of accident. But Cosimo evaluated this four week placement, in combination with making it strange via ethnographic work and reflection very positively in retrospect, because he also started to think more clearly about his longer work experience (prior to studying social work) and "to finally turn it into his story", as he comments in his report.

His ethnographic final report contains many analytical reflections, which are also informed by a thorough reading of various social scientific texts (ethnographies, but also basic theoretical literature) which turned out to be relevant for making sense of his experience. The main part of the following excerpt consists of field notes though, in this case mostly notes on his observation of the work of Maria, a member of the nursing staff. The student had been assigned to the so called "psycho-social service" (one social pedagogue and three other staff members), but he was also drawn into care work in between, as the following notes illustrate (a member of the "psycho-social service" had suggested that he could assist the members of the nursing staff this morning):

"She (Maria, G.R.) disappears into Mr. Salomon's room. I follow her. It is pitch-dark. Maria pulls up the roller blinds, opens the curtain and exclaims, 'Good morning, slept well, the two of you?' No answer. There are two beds in the room. Mr. Salomon is living together with his female cousin.[12] She is already awake and is lying on the edge of her bed. I say to her, 'Good morning, Mrs. Salomon.' She looks at me, but does not respond. I repeat somewhat louder, 'Good morning, Mrs. Salomon.' Maria barks at me impatiently, 'Come on, she doesn't hear anything.' Suddenly a low voice can be heard, 'I do hear, but everything is broken-down inside.' In doing so she points to her head. I am sorry that she understood it. Now Mr. Salomon is awake, too. Maria asks him, if I may be around. 'I am freezing,' he says, 'everything is broken-down, everything I see is black.' Maria looks at me as if she insinuates something and nods her head. I think I know what she means."

At that time I noticed Maria's quasi contemptuous communicative style in her dealing with Mrs. Salomon. Mrs. Salomon's difficulty to respond to my greeting with a greeting in return obviously provided her a frame for characterising Mrs. Salomon in an apodictic way (....). I had the impression that Mrs. Salomon sensed the symbolic violence of the utterance, when she responded by offering a divergent interpretation of her silence. (....)

"She uncovers him – and asks him in the same breath if he would like to get up. I hate it to get uncovered so suddenly. That's what my mother had done in my childhood when I did not manage to get out of my bed once again. He is lying in his bed; he only wears the upper part of his pyjama and his underwear. How old could he be? I estimate: around eighty. Maria seizes him around his neck and below his legs and levers him out of his bed. His eyes are still closed. He asks if someone could close the window. Maria tells him that the window is closed. He repeats, 'I am cold.' I say in a low voice, 'That's right. There is a draught.' Maria probably did not hear me. He sits on the edge of his bed, his hair is scrubby. Maria helps him to get on his feet. Both of them falter (...) moving to the bathroom. Mr. Salomon is made to sit before a mirror, since he cannot stand for a long time as Maria tells me. His eyes are still closed, but Maria has already started to wash him. First the face, then the back, the upper part

[12] Student's footnote: „I had already heard about this unusual room constellation. When I asked how this had come about, a nurse told me, 'They have always lived together.'"

of the body, the legs, the genitals, everything is getting done in the chanting rhythm of short orders, like a military march on a drill-ground. Mr. Salomon appears trained. Sometimes he repeats the requests while contemplating them. While washing him Maria examines small changes of the skin which would not get noticed by a lay person, she carefully investigates hidden corners. (.....) Does he notice what Maria is doing with him?

I pick up the used towels from the ground and put them in the clothes bag in the corridor. I ask myself if Mr. Salomon cannot wash some parts of his body by himself. I don't ask Maria, it is probably a matter of time. Maria explains to me that Mr. Salomon had once worked in a candle factory and that he had travelled a lot, he had even driven to India in a VW beetle. She tells me that it is all in the files. I ask myself if he could tell me more about it. Without thinking about it I say, 'Oh, that's great, Mr. Salomon. How long did it take you to get to India?' He whispers, 'Everything is black, everything is broken-down.' I don't respond. Maria has already dressed him completely. 'Well, we made it again ...mmh ... sweety', and she laughs into his face. When she puts on his socks on his feet she asks me, if I could take him to the dining room area. She says she still needs to go to Mr. Bauer, another resident. If I wished to do so, I could come along with her.

When I walk together with Mr. Salomon in the corridor, I try again to talk to him. His eyes are half open now. He does not answer. When we have arrived in the dining room I put him on a chair, pour coffee into his cup and prepare his breakfast. When I say good-bye to him, he asks me again to close the window. 'The windows are closed,' yells a woman, who is also sitting at the table and has overheard everything. I don't know what to say. I prefer to say nothing even though I have the feeling that I should say something. But what? (.....)"

When I accompanied Maria and supported her in the care of residents, my experiences as a nursing aide in a rehabilitation clinic came back to my mind. I had experienced this time as physically and psychologically straining. Being constantly faced with "sick persons", the "fragility of being" and death was a "marginal situation" (in the sense of Karl Jaspers) for me in both times.

Even though I noticed basic similarities in how care work was carried out in both institutions, I recognised how the act of helping also contained humiliating elements in the nursing home for the elderly. The humiliation as immanent part of the helping process is being reinforced by the organisational conditions. Quite limited time resources produce an unstable in-

> teraction arrangement, in which the pragmatic orientation of the nursing staff ("processing" residents remains the dominant aim of action) deforms the perception of the elderly persons. (.....)

My impression is that various breaches of interactional reciprocity are a common theme which runs through these minute field notes. The student author is quite sensitised to the routine absence of respect, subtle forms of mortification and reification, the revoking of the adult status and different violations of what Goffman (1971: 51-87) calls "territories of the self", and he comments on these aspects in his retrospective reflections. He is also attuned to the loneliness which he perceives in the residents' lives and their withdrawal from everyday communication. The extreme shrinking of their personal space is visible in many ways. At the same time it becomes noticeable that members of staff do hard, physically demanding work under extreme time pressure. It is obvious that these fieldnotes are not indifferent and "cool". They reveal a sensibility about disorder in communication and action schemes and contain an element of criticism (which might not comply with the canon of more traditional ethnographic writing). The notes are also rich in conveying something of the inner states of the author in the depicted situations: the wish to reach someone who seems hard to reach, his embarrassment about condescending remarks about a resident in her presence, his helplessness etc.

I just presented quite different student field notes and retrospective commentaries: These are notes and reflections about diverse fields of action, heterogeneous settings, and different degrees of practical involvement of the respective student observer: While the student trainee in inner city street work had become a bona fide member of her team, and can draw on her experiential knowledge which she had acquired locally while doing this kind of work, the two other students are still "on the margin" and just lend their hand, or are asked to lend their hand (cf. footnote 8), in situations in which other workers are at the centre: the medical officer in the first example and the member of the nursing staff in the third example. But of course they bring their own experiences and sensibilities along (like Cosimo Mangione who had worked as a nursing aide with old people for a prolonged period of time before). Their own biographies leave their mark in the field notes. The notes

exhibit features of a personal style of writing, but they also adhere to a common set of principles, e.g. an orientation to sequence, a differentiation of perspectives, making the "I" visible etc.

The students wrote down these field notes *shortly after* (and still impressed by) the events which they found worth reporting. Maybe they had scribbled down some keywords or quotes in between in order to have something which could help them to memorise the unfolding of scenes and situations later on when they wrote the protocol.[13] Students found it surprising how much they remembered when they followed the advice to stay sensitive to sequence, e.g. with regard to the unfolding, or non-unfolding, of a conversation. The absence of a second-pair part in (what conversational analysts refer to as) adjacency pairs, like the absence of an answer or a greeting in return, can become something memorable. And the process of writing leads to new insights, too, which is often observable in spontaneous commentaries about something "which comes to my mind right now".

I will now touch on another type of data which I found useful in self-reflective research of social work students: spontaneous narratives in which students look back at the Gestalt of a specific practice which they had experienced, e.g. the history of their working relationship with a certain client, or the history of a project in which they had been involved.

2.2 Narrating one's own practice

A preliminary note: When I work with students of social work in different kinds of seminars I often use primary data like ethnographic field notes, transcriptions of audio-recordings of professional action schemes (like counseling encounters) and narrative interviews. These materials are sometimes taken from my own research, but more often from studies of social work students, since I think it is important to get across to successive generations of students that there is a tradition of respectable qualitative research of

[13] Cf. Emerson et al. (1995: 31-35) who discuss "jottings" as "mnemonic devices" (Clifford 1990: 51).

"people like them" and that some of the interesting data were collected by students during their first attempts to do research.[14]

The data which I use most are narrative interviews: either autobiographical narrative interviews, in which informants tell their life histories (Schütze 1983, 2008; Riemann 1987), or interviews with professionals in which they recapitulate the development of their shared working relationships with clients (Riemann 2000). One student told me recently after her graduation, when she looked back at her social work course, that being exposed to transcriptions of such interviews (with mental patients, drug addicts, social workers, ex-prisoners, priests, children of mental patients, parents of disabled children, political refugees, "late home comers" from Kazakhstan etc.) had been significant for her, since she thus got somehow in touch with people who often could have been clients: She learned to read or "listen" very carefully and patiently and to discover what they had gone through. This also means resisting the tendency to succumb to a "logic of subsumption" and to simply put diagnostic labels on them.

Discovering of what informants have gone through means overcoming a mere naïve reading of such texts, and learning to take into account the substance matter, *as well as* the formal features of a narrative. Students learn that arriving at a deeper understanding of the narrator's experience and discovering the structural processes of a life course (Schütze 1981): trajectories of suffering (Schütze 1995; Riemann/Schütze 1991), experiences of unfolding creativity or metamorphosis, different biographical action schemes etc., also means to pay attention to *how* something was communicated: Differentiating between different schemes of communicaton (narration, argumentation, description), discovering the narrative units and detecting the analytical relevance of symptomatic textual indicators (like self-corrective background constructions, argumentative sequences before the narrative coda etc.) are important features of such an approach (Schütze 1983, 1987, 2008; Riemann 1987, 2003).

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[14] Oftentimes students have a much better access to certain social worlds, milieus and secluded places than more "accomplished" researchers, and they can make use of their "entrance tickets" and experiences to develop their research projects. Their practice placements, e.g., in total institutions, might also be helpful in this regard.

This long preliminary note was necessary as a background for referring to a type of student research which I call "narrating one's own practice" (cf. Riemann 2010: 85-91). If students have developed an analytical approach to the reading of transcriptions of off-the-cuff story-telling about one's own experiences (i.e., spontaneous autobiographical or work narratives), it is also possible that they consider their own narratives about *their experiences* with social work as data for their own research projects. It is a leap into something else, which is not quite easy. An illustration:

> A Swiss student of social work, Myriam Hollenstein, who was enrolled in our Nuremberg bachelor course, had spent her one semester practice placement in a project which took care of young refugees, so called "unaccompanied refugee minors". When we talked about her experiences in this project I learned that she often thought about the development of her relationship with an adolescent girl from Eritrea. I encouraged her to tell the story of their relationship in a narrative interview. She liked the idea and asked another student to interview her. Afterwards she transcribed the interview.
>
> Copies of the transcription were distributed among the participants of our research workshop in which she took part on a regular basis. The members of the workshop read this transcription carefully and made notes. When we came together for our workshop meeting we turned this situation into an additional interview by asking her many questions which had developed during our reading of the text. The student used parts of the audio-recording of our workshop session to think further about what had happened between her and the girl and to write her report[15]. She included excerpts from the narrative interview, which had been conducted with her, as illustrations.
>
> A few months later I interviewed her again in order to find out how she had experienced this "narrative project". She emphasised (in this "third interview") how important it had been for her to have become familiar with narrative interviews which had been done with others before focusing on her own narrative. Otherwise it would not have been possible for her to

[15] In this case it was not her bachelor thesis, but a report of praxis reflection which is required in the context of our curriculum in Nuremberg. The student's subsequent bachelor thesis was a single case study on the girl's life history (based on an autobiographical narrative interview with the girl).

gain a sufficient analytical distance. After the narrative interview had already been a first occasion for arriving at new insights[16] she felt that the setting of the research workshop was helpful for gaining even more distance, on the one hand because of the participants' further narrative questions and on the other hand because of their theoretical commentaries. Especially one commentary on her having become a "significant other" for the Eritrean girl had made her think a lot about her style of work, and the conditions under which trust had developed. In this context she started to reflect aloud, and in a totally unpretentious way, about her own style of working with clients.

One condition for the deepening of her relationship with the girl was the discovery that they had something in common which set them apart from others: The girl's family had suffered political persecution in Eritrea: right now she does not know if her parents and her sister are still alive, because the family belonged to the Church of Jehovah's Witnesses. The student's grandparents also belong to this church, whereas she had never been a member and had stayed distant. At the same time she still feels close to her grandparents and has always felt safe in their presence. The student discovered, in the process of working with the girl, that the image of her own good relationship with her grandparents became an important point of reference for the girl, during her attempts to slowly emancipate herself from her family's rigid religious and moral convictions: It was essential for the girl that she did not have to accuse herself of betraying her parents, who still remained her most beloved and trustworthy persons: something like an "emancipation without alienation" (to borrow an apt phrase of Everett Hughes 1984b: 573).

The following sequence is taken from the (first) narrative interview with the student in which she mentions the "link religion" (as she calls it in her report) for the first time. The beginning of this sequence, which I translated from the German, refers to the first phase of her practice placement:

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[16] This is a recurring feature of off-the-cuff-story telling about one's own experiences, as can be seen in various argumentative commentaries on past events and experiences ("I now recognise ...", "in retrospect ...", "I didn't know then, but I know now ..."). See Schütze (1987: 94-98; 138-194) for a detailed discussion of the epistemic features of off-the-cuff story-telling and a discussion of argumentative sequences which are embedded in such narratives (their functions, the places where they regularly appear, and their epistemic accomplishments).

> "And I still know: Someone had talked to me and I was advised, 'Well, Mimi (the Eritrean girl, G.R.), she is really a nice girl. You can talk to her about everything except religion, because she is a Jehovah's Witness.' And apparently she had had some discussions with him about this / he was doing his civil service[17] there / therefore he had advised against talking about this topic.
>
> And then / I still know / I had started in October and it was some time before Christmas, that was the first time that I had more contact with her. Then / I don't know exactly any more how the situation developed / in any case we had a conversation. And she / we came to the topic of Christmas / and she said, 'Well, I don't celebrate Christmas'. And then I reacted by saying, 'Yeah, I know, my grandparents don't celebrate (Christmas) either." And then first she looked at me, somewhat perplexed, and then she asked me if they don't celebrate (Christmas) because of religious reasons. And then I said, 'yes'. And she was / reacted quite overjoyed, 'Are they Jehovah's Witnesses?' /Maybe I have to add: She always switches a little from German into English, and I think she said this in English. That means, if she feels that there are things that are important to her and if she wants that they are well understood, she suddenly speaks English, even if she had spoken German before. And I think she said this in English, if I remember correctly.
>
> And then I / I did so on purpose / I didn't tell anybody among the other youths, and I did it with her on purpose, since I thought that's a bit of a link which she can refer to. Since I mean there are many different religions there (in the project, G.R.), many Muslims, many Christians, too, but I mean Jehovah's Witnesses, I believe that was always somewhat excluded, too. And I told myself maybe this is something where she has a link. And she really did so right away, well she was quite enthusiastic right away that there is someone else who knows the religion. And I think she had often experienced a more negative reaction: "a sect", and so on. And I believe it felt good for her that it was different now. And yes, we talked about this a little during the evening / afternoon. But that was the end of it at that time."

This was an example of how a student used her own *oral* narrative, on what she had experienced as a future professional, as data for self-reflection and

[17] I.e., "civil service" as a conscientious objector.

analysis. What has been more common (and also quite rewarding) among the students with whom I have worked are single case studies which consist of (a) their detailed *written* narratives on the development of, e.g., their relationship with a client, which serve as a basis for (b) reflecting about the arc of work (Strauss et al. 1985) and the paradoxes and recurring problems of professional practice (Schütze 1992, 1996, 2000; Riemann 2000), which are visible in the respective case, possible traps and mistakes and alternative ways of doing things. Some of such case studies were exceptionally careful and examples of serious "soul-searching", at the same time they also explicated general features of a certain field of professional work.

3. Looking ahead

Maybe some readers regard my presentation and discussion of two types of self-reflective projects of students of social work as something which merely belongs to the realm of "university didactic": "He told us (a) how his students spend part of their time in their social work course and (b) how he spends his time with his students. So what?" I will make a few comments about what I think are general implications of this kind of work.

When future professionals like students of social work[18] (a) become familiar with interpretive or qualitative approaches and procedures of data collection and analysis and (b) do their own research projects, they acquire *skills of case analysis*, i.e. competencies for the analysis of single and collective cases, which are an important base for their professional practice and decision making. They learn to look closer and more carefully at their own practice or the practice of other people and develop a deeper understanding of the lives and the world of clients, an understanding which also transcends and criticises a "logic of subsumption" and mere diagnostic ascriptions. Taking such a process of professional socialisation seriously also has critical consequences for the design of curricula and the introduction and consolidation of seminars of ethnographic practice analysis (Riemann 2005) and qualitative

[18] Of course, the following argument applies to teacher training and other types of professional socialisation as well.

research workshops (Kraimer 1998; Riemann/Schütze 1987; Reim/Riemann 1997; Riemann 2011) in social work training and the social sciences in general: social arrangements for doing interpretive research together.

Maybe some readers have the impression that I only dealt with examples of professional self-reflection.[19] I think that the appeal of this kind of work derives from the fact that *the boundaries of professional self-reflection and research are blurred*. The data and analytical reflections (about self and others) are both documents of one's own professional socialisation and documents which allow for the discovery of general features of fields of social work practice and paradoxes or problems of professional work, which are of a broader interest. If future practitioners engage in such processes of self-reflection, it is necessary to develop (group) arrangements that foster a gradual emergence of analytical distance and prevent students from "stewing in their own juice".

The fact that such research is carried out by students does not mean that it is of minor importance. It is real research (in the style of "grounded theories" as developed and systematized by Glaser and Strauss (1967)): research "from below" and "in their own affairs". I am aware that this statement does not sound very convincing in times in which a lot of people (prefer to or are obliged to) document their "specific academic weight" on their homepages by reference to the amount of third-party funds which they have attracted in their career. Working with students does not count much in terms of academic prestige. But: Students, and especially students of social work, often have an access to more or less secluded areas of the social reality. Their studies, in which they carefully observe, document and discuss their own professional work and the work of others, might be interesting in the light of traditions like Chicago Interactionism and its focus on professions and work (Hughes 1984a; Strauss et al. 1985) and ethnomethodological "studies of

[19] Bettina Völter (2008) suggested differentiating more carefully between the different functions of qualitative or reconstructive research in social work and developed a useful distinction between contributions to (a) social work research as such, (b) professional self-reflection and (c) the design or adaption of practical methods of working with clients (e.g. with regard to the usability of narrative interviewing for practical purposes).

work" (Pollner/Emerson 2001). Students on practice placements might be especially good fieldworkers because they are not yet blinded by routine.[20] The development and spread of research workshops (at least in Germany) reveals that *a distinction between "student research" and "real research" is a mere interest-bound fiction*, which clouds the practices and processes of generating new insights.

A development in which interpretive student research becomes a matter of course in departments of social work might contribute to *changes in the relationship between social work on the one hand and "proud" professions (like medicine) or established disciplines (like sociology)* on the other hand. Of course it is quite difficult to generalise since such relationships differ widely between countries with their specific academic traditions.[21] But it is safe to say that the relationship between early American social work and (Chicago) sociology of the 1920s can be described as a hierarchical and gendered division of labour and a relationship of expropriations, as Jennifer Platt demonstrates with regard to the development of the case study approach, which had originated in social work contexts: a fact which has been more or less forgotten in sociology.[22] In this context it is interesting to study

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[20] Anselm Strauss made use of this fact in his research when he turned student nurses into his co-workers (Strauss/Glaser 1970). Studies of social work students were also a significant source for an influential interactionist theory of professional work and professional paradoxes (Schütze 1992, 1996, 2000)

[21] In Germany the situation is further complicated because of the distinctions which are often drawn, celebrated and reinforced between a university bound educational science (with its subdiscipline of social pedagogy) and social work traditions which are primarily affiliated with universities of applied sciences or "Fachhochschulen". The practices of self-distinction and counter-distinction in this context are first and foremost of zoological interest.

[22] Platt (1996: 264) notes: "Accounts written from within sociology, as history of sociology, generally treat both other disciplines, and groups outside the academy, as parts of the background. They are seen as instrumental to the main ends of sociologists, or as introducing distortions into the natural or appropriate course of pure sociological development. That is the perspective one expects when groups write their own history. In the case of 1920s Chicago, at least, this is singularly inappropriate, and it does not make sense either to draw a sharp boundary between "sociology" and other activities, or to treat the latter as subsidiary. It is only by doing so that the university department has been made to appear pioneering in its research methods. Where it did make a distinctive contribution was not in the practicalities of research, but in its theo-

more closely the achievements of early social work protagonists like Mary Richmond (1922), who had developed a quasi-ethnographic style of case analysis, the originality of which has not been sufficiently taken into account in the social sciences (Riemann/Schütze 2012). There was also a lively debate in social work (in the first decades of the 20th century) about writing styles for the purpose of documentation in case records, which partially antedated the current discussions on ethnographic writing in anthropology and sociology (cf. Tice 1998: 54-55). This early debate among social workers, in which sociologists sometimes participated too (Burgess 1928), has not left its mark in current discussions.

What I find important is the fact this early debate was not a debate about research, but about practice: writing about encounters with clients and the question how to write about them was a matter of the utmost significance for social workers and the social work profession in general. I think that social workers and students of social work should pay more attention to the issue of how to write: both spontaneously and in a disciplined way, about their practice and how to communicate its complexity in a self-reflective ethnographic style. It is a matter of *finding and keeping their own voice,* also in the light of the expectations to comply with standardised forms of documentation in the context of evaluations and quality assurance, a type of writing which is more or less enforced from the outside. I also believe that this is quite relevant in the context of a grassroots development of social work in Asian or African countries in order to avoid or to overcome a dependency on Western models of social work.

Familiarising students with such types of self-reflection about their own practice might have consequences for *fostering a research-based, self-critical and case specific professional discourse on what can go wrong in social work and what can be done about it*. I think that such a discourse is still somewhat underdeveloped in social work, widespread case discussions notwithstanding. I have the impression that students of social work often

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risation; they named methods, analysed them and rationalised them, especially in discussions of 'case-study' method. To say that is not to belittle the department's pioneering role within sociology, where what it did in practice as well as theory was indeed novel."

learn very early during their training how to present their practice experiences in such a way that they seem to comply with certain professional standards, i.e. they learn how to present their "professionalism". I think it would be equally important if they learn to become self-critical ethnographers of their own affairs, which also includes unpretentiously reconstructing and communicating quite specifically in reference to certain situations "how things got out of hand", so that all participants of a discourse have a basis for discovering professional paradoxes and obstinate problems of work in a field of practice and can contemplate options of coping with them in an ethically justifiable way. The criteria of such a criticism are grounded in the sequential order, as well as in the interactive reciprocity of processes of interaction, communication, action and work.[23]

I have tried to spell out the practical and political implications of this kind of work: e.g. with regard to the acquisition of skills of professional case analysis, the fostering of a self-reflective, self-critical and case specific professional discourse and forms of collective analysis, the personal and collective appreciation of one's own praxis and the need for developing autonomous forms of describing and voicing its complexity. I trust that readers who are at home in traditions of action and participatory research have discovered many of their own relevancies and concerns in the style of work which has been described in this paper, even though possible differences should not be obscured. The social work students or student apprentices whose work was partially presented in my article were not involved in the design and implementation of projects in which research was combined with "action" in order to plan, bring about and monitor specific changes in organisations and communities. Their foremost and modest concern was to become familiar with a field of professional practice in social work, a field which they had usually not known before, and to acquire professional competencies. At the same time they were encouraged and supported to look at their own practical experiences as "ethnographers of their own affairs" (Riemann 2006) and to produce data which could then serve as a basis for joint case analyses together with their peers, i.e., their community of (novice) profes-

[23] I owe this insight to Fritz Schütze.

sionals. Such discussions of the empirical material were never "purely academic" and detached, but also critical and self-critical. Participants were asked to discover breaches of reciprocity in the interaction of professionals and clients, to stay sensitised to trajectories of suffering, and the suffering which could be (often thoughtlessly and unnecessarily) inflicted by powerful interventions and routine bureaucratic processing; and to discover possible alternatives of action and work arrangements which could be more adequate with regard to the practical issues at hand.

But of course the style of work which was presented and discussed in this article could also fruitfully be applied in projects of action and participatory research, as it has been especially demonstrated in the work of Bettina Völter (2007, 2008) who has initiated a very interesting German-Brazilian project of socio-cultural action research ("Luz que Anda") in a Brazilian village (together with the theater pedagogue Marion Küster and the educator Geralda Araújo). The students of social work and theater pedagogy which have been involved in this project were encouraged to become self-reflective ethnographers of their own affairs, which included writing, sharing and reflecting about their own field notes.

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