Ethnographies of practice - practising ethnography: resources for self-reflective social work
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Postprint / Postprint
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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ETHNOGRAPHIES OF PRACTICE— PRACTISING ETHNOGRAPHY
Resources for self-reflective social work[1]

This paper argues that acquiring competencies in different approaches and procedures in qualitative or interpretative social research provides a strong foundation for case analysis in professional social work practice. When students of social work become familiar with such research and are encouraged to engage in their own supervised projects they develop skills for a circumspect and sensitive practice with clients. The paper reports on work with students of social work in Germany, which can be described as an attempt to help them to become self-reflective ethnographers in their own affairs, of their own emergent social work practice. It spells out different phases of a process in which they learn to make their own practice strange. This process consists of developing different competencies in observing, analysing and writing, and requires a setting in which students' written observations and reflections can be shared and discussed by their peers in a critical, egalitarian and supportive manner. The author thinks that such a critical and self-critical discourse which addresses professional issues in general, as well as the individual student's (or practioner's) experiences and reflections, can have important implications for the collective development of social work and its relationship with other professions.

Keywords social work training; reflective practice; professional work; ethnography; qualitative research; grounded theory

(Mis-)understanding a narrative

The setting is a German family-counselling centre which is part of a church-affiliated welfare association. A social worker meets his client in the beginning phase of a long series of weekly counselling sessions.[2] So that he can get to know him better, the social worker simply asks his interaction partner to tell him his life story. The young man begins to talk. He is quite motivated to tell his story and goes into a stream of recollections, and a detailed off-the-cuff narrative develops. The social worker—a friendly man and an experienced professional—listens carefully and avoids interrupting or asking questions: to do so could destroy the story line. But if you watch the scene carefully—I had the chance to do so as a participant observer—you might notice that the social worker is irritated by something in the client's presentation. After the client has gone, the social worker shares with me his impressions of the encounter, and I learn more about the source of his irritation. He had experienced this narrative as diffuse and disorderly; his interaction partner's

frequent 'jumping back and forth' while telling his story had made him nervous. At the end of our conversation the social worker summed up his impressions by slightly derogatory typecasting of his client in general.

The social worker had done something which good professionals should do, but which does not always happen. He had arranged a situation in which his interaction partner could freely speak about himself; he had listened to him, had not interrupted, and had tried to understand him. But at the same time something had gone wrong. With a somewhat different way of listening, he could have discovered that his client's narrative was complicated indeed, but not disorderly.[3] With such a way of listening, he might have found the things which made listening difficult in the first place an important resource for deeper understanding of complicated biographical experiences in the client's past—and also the client's current problems of coming to terms with them. The utterances which the social worker had regarded as 'disorganised' were the narrator's attempts to correct his presentation when he noticed that he had left out something quite important which 'should' have been mentioned earlier and which (he then realised) needed to be filled in to make sure that his presentation was sufficiently understandable and made sense to his listener and to himself.

Such corrective devices that temporarily interrupt the story line have been termed 'background constructions' (Schütze, 1987, pp. 207–235). As they insert and develop such background constructions, and sometimes encounter a new lack of plausibility, it happens that narrators feel obliged to further interrupt with yet more background constructions so as to make the first background construction understandable: such additional insertions can be called 'background constructions of the second degree'.

A reader might regard these observations and categorisations as instances of 'narrativist' or sociolinguistic hair splitting which are only interesting for an academic reading of texts, but this misses the point: the detailed and comparative analysis of spontaneous narratives about self-lived experiences has shown again and again that such background constructions are symptomatic (instead of intentional) textual indicators which refer to quite difficult—chaotic, opaque, traumatic, guilty or shameful—experiences whose narrative recapitulation turns out to be difficult. There is something in the stream of experiences which resists being clearly remembered, yet in the end, due to the constraints of story telling, such experiences are still likely to be revealed or at least suggested (Schütze, 1987, pp. 207–235; 1992b; Riemann, 2000, pp. 57–58, 230–231, 272; 2002, pp. 181–190).

Discovering such things by listening in a different way is not unimportant for professionals in their daily work. Their practice is tricky, risky: social workers can do harm if they do not listen carefully or if (despite their attempt to listen carefully) they mis-understand something. All too quickly, when confronted by awkward phenomena which they misread, social workers, like other professionals, resort to stigmatising ascriptions.

On the relevance of social scientific case analysis for the training of social workers

By presenting and discussing this small episode, I wanted to illustrate my argument that an important part of social work consists of inconspicuous but demanding case

analysis. Of course, there is a difference between case analysis within professional practice and case analysis in the social sciences; social science analysis is not subject to the practical pressures of constant and consequence-laden decision-making that characterise work with social work clients. Case analysing by professional practitioners is a complex epistemic process of gaining insight while at the same time being 'entangled' in work with clients. This process cannot be reduced to the mere (top-down) application of general knowledge and higher-order abstractions: this was demonstrated—under the influence of John Dewey—by Donald Schön in his work on reflective practice (1983). When the social worker mentioned above listens to his client and tries to make sense of his story, he is engaged in a case analysis. And, as I hope my story suggests, things can go wrong.

I want to present some of my work at the Department of Social Work at the University of Bamberg (Germany). This consists of assisting social work students to develop competence in practical case analysis and to become more sensitised about their own involvement in the processing of clients and about the potential consequences of their own practice and assessments. Students are encouraged and trained to look at their own work—and the practice of institutions and professionals that they encounter—as ethnographers who are trying to make their own practice strange. The idea is that they become self-reflective *ethnographers in their own affairs, of their own emergent social work practice*—something which distinguishes them from anthropological or sociological ethnographers who have a different and more distant relationship to the object of their particular study. The term 'ethnography' as I use it does not refer to a specific method but to a systematic approach to social reality as something which should not be taken for granted and the strangeness of which should be appreciated, an attitude which strives for understanding at the same time (Schütze, 1994). My approach has been influenced by my long-term collaboration with Fritz Schütze, especially at the Department of Social Work at the University of Kassel, and by the studies of work by Anselm Strauss and his co-workers. These studies were also shaped by the authors' reflections on *their own work and illness experiences* (Strauss & Glaser, 1970; Strauss *et al.*, 1985, pp. 294–295; Corbin & Strauss, 1988). During his last decades, Strauss's most important research collaborators were sociologically trained nurses who used their own professional experience as a valuable resource for research.

The basic point I want to discuss is that, for social workers, familiarity with different interpretive approaches to, and different procedures of, social science case analysis can serve as an important foundation for professional case work. Professional analyses are necessarily based on 'short cut' practices (Schütze, 1994, pp. 280–287) and have to take the practical circumstances of working with clients and the time constraints of decision making into account. The 'case reconstruction' analysis of individual and collective single cases is something which social work practice (as one type of professional work) and interpretative social research have in common. Both strive for a deeper understanding of phenomena which are often regarded and stigmatised as strange, deviant, incomprehensible or immoral.

Social work professionals have special access to experiences of suffering and to milieus that are inaccessible to the majority of the population. This is rather similar to the concerns and work of ethnographically oriented social scientists (like the

sociologists and students of sociology in Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s of the twentieth century), who have turned the different social worlds of their own urban societies into their objects of study. What is at issue is not just approaching what seems strange, but making strange what appears utterly familiar. This avoids the widespread tendency to subsume phenomena too rapidly under taken-for-granted categories—i.e. to incorporate or 'nostrify' them (Stagl, 1981) and thereby to claim control. If (future) social workers become familiar with different approaches and procedures in qualitative or interpretative social research and if they are encouraged to do their own supervised qualitative field studies, they will acquire helpful competencies for their work with clients. Such competencies are also essential for the development of a self-confident relationship with members of 'proud' professions (Hughes, 1984b). I am thinking of approaches like biographical research, which has especially developed on the basis of autobiographical narrative interviews;[4] conversational and interaction analysis; the analysis of long-term work processes and professional–client relationships (especially on the basis of narrative interviews); the investigation of social worlds (Strauss, 1978) and milieus; and the self-reflective ethnographic exploration of one's own practice. In the remainder of this paper, I will focus on the latter and on the associated social arrangement of teaching and learning.

Learning to make one's own practice strange

In order to encourage and to make possible such student research two conditions should be satisfied. First, students should have the chance to gain intensive and extensive life and work experiences which they can take back into their college or university, i.e. experiences which somehow 'count', get noticed and become relevant in their academic environment. What I have in mind are not only work placements that are integrated into their current course of social work training, but also experiences which students have gained before entering the university, e.g. during previous placements, during their work in hospitals, nursery schools and institutions for children and youths with 'behaviour problems' and during non-military national service as conscientious objectors. Often teaching staff disregard and downgrade such previous experiences as resources for training and research. This results in something curious. When this happens, students informally and often unconsciously retrain themselves to reformulate their questions and problems—those that have developed in such previous experiences—in such a way that their original context is no longer recognizable.[5] Second, social work education should be organised in such a way that there is a space for student research and that such research is regarded as something valuable. There is a growing interest in qualitative student research in quite a few German social work departments in *Fachhochschulen* (universities of applied sciences) and universities, but it is not certain that the increasingly technocratic reform of higher education and the 'acceleration' of new training courses foster an atmosphere in which students will be encouraged to discover and work on their own research problems. As far as the situation in German social work education is concerned, I think that the current wholesale introduction of Bachelor Degree courses runs the risk of students getting out of breath, with higher time pressure in coping with fragmented

modules and less time spent in work placements. Students need breathing space to discover their interests and do research, i.e. to make a journey, the course and duration of which cannot be exactly predicted and controlled. Some current changes go against what is needed.

I now want to focus on the social arrangement in which students are supervised in their self-reflective ethnographic work on their own work placements—something which I call 'making one's own practice strange'.[6] The prime data in this kind of work are students' fieldnotes. In addition, students' spontaneous oral narratives about their past work experiences have turned out to be valuable data. Such stories can be recorded and their transcriptions can be subjected to the type of textual analysis which has developed in recent decades in dealing with narrative interviews (Riemann, 2000). Since the analysis of the narratives requires a somewhat longer treatment, in this paper I will only focus on the work with fieldnotes.

When students of social work are asked to write down ethnographic fieldnotes 'about their experiences during their work placements' they often feel uneasy because of the vagueness of this request ('Am I supposed to write a novel?'). There are various reasons for their mental reservation:

- Sometimes they feel that they are being asked to return to an earlier phase of their schooling—the phase of 'experiential essays'—which they regard as something they have put behind them and advanced beyond. In many cases they have also become distrustful about their capacity to write well about personal experiences.
- Often they assume that fieldnotes are 'unscientific' or 'merely subjective'. In other seminars they hear that using the first person singular or the personal pronoun should not appear in texts of social science; they are annoyed by being asked to write such personal texts. They often tend to equate serious scientific thinking and professionalism with a top-down model of 'applying theory to practice'. When students learn to orient themselves to, and to 'profess' certain 'general theories' of orientation and explanation with regard to what is happening or should happen in the interaction with clients, it is difficult for them to bracket off such 'received ideas' while observing and describing actual processes and situations.
- Some difficulties originate in previous learning experiences concerning professional and institutional requirements, like having to master the language of writing official documents. There has to be a process of unlearning involved, i.e. a process of resisting the 'natural' tendency to subsume observations under pre-given official and authoritative categories.
- Some reservations derive from students' relationships with professional practitioners in the field in which they work and which they are asked to observe. If they identify with practitioners or have become friends with them, they sometimes feel that describing and 'presenting' them to other readers is disloyal and an affront (even if the identification of institutions and persons is not possible for readers who are not familiar with the depicted events and settings).
- Fieldnotes can reveal a lot about the author. Sometimes students feel uneasy that they are supposed to present such personal documents to other students whom they do not know very well and whom they have not yet learned to trust.

(Consequently, the seminars for practice analysis to which I will later refer should be rather small.)

• Unlike sociological or anthropological ethnographers who usually enter and become familiar with a 'scene', a milieu or a social world (Strauss, 1978) without intending to become natives themselves, future social workers want to make use of their work placements by acquiring valuable competencies in their profession in that world. Their existential situation is different. If they are expected to bracket off (and to put in quotation marks) the practice assumptions, practical theories and typifications which they have become familiar with during their work placements and which often have become a part of their own thinking, they may experience this as painful and stressful (even disempowering), especially if the respective terminologies and meaning systems enjoy high prestige (for example, the categories of psychiatry).

Given these difficulties, how can students become attuned to writing ethnographic fieldnotes? The mastery of writing fieldnotes has traditionally been thought of as the preserve of anthropologists: as something which distinguishes them in an essential way. However, in contrast to the postmodern interest in the rhetoric of ethnographies in general which has been stimulated by the influential book edited by Clifford and Marcus in 1986, it is safe to say that the details concerning the production of fieldnotes and their constitutive properties and the variants of this genre have been neglected as a topic in cultural anthropology—and have often been regarded as something to be passed on orally from older to younger generations of ethnographers. Nonetheless, the topic of fieldnotes has been 'discovered' in the last 15 years in anthropology (especially Sanjek, 1990), and some of the suggestions in recent anthropological and especially sociological literature are quite helpful for future field researchers (Emerson *et al.*, 1995, 2001). There have also been a number of useful methodological publications about conducting qualitative field research including writing fieldnotes in the symbolic interactionist tradition (e.g. Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). I have found that students can at least get a sense of the style(s) and functions of fieldnotes by a prior reading of ethnographic studies and familiarity with the final field reports of former students (which always include a lot of fieldnotes). But such reports should not be taken by them as stage directions or 'cookbook recipes', since this would block the creativity of their own free writing.

I will present the translation of a short fieldnote which can be found in the ethnographic Final Report of a social work student. This note shows that, for the development of an ethnographic attitude, it is helpful to be unfamiliar with the field of observation: students discover new things—also in themselves.

The student reconstructs her experiences during her work placement in a psychiatric clinic. She refers to a situation on the first day of her placement when she is supposed to meet her practice teacher, the social worker Mrs K., in her office at eight o'clock in the morning, but finds the door closed. She reports that she sat down on the lawn and waited. While she was still wondering whether or not she had misunderstood the date of their appointment, a young man appeared. At this point in her report she presents the following excerpt from her fieldnotes in which she remembers her first encounter with patients of this clinic:

This is probably the first client I have met here. He looks insecure. He has thrown away his cigarette and is constantly fumbling with a piece of paper that is in a transparent folder. I greet him by saying, 'hello'. We grin at each other. He does not say anything. While I am still thinking if and how I should start a conversation with him, he says, 'Hi, are you[7] also here because of the bill?' I must certainly look somewhat puzzled. I do not know at all what kind of 'bill' could be meant. He probably realises my bewilderment, and he looks in another direction. I say, 'No, I am not here because of the bill. I am on a work placement with the social workers of the clinic for the next few weeks and I am supposed to start today. I have been waiting for Mrs K. for quite some time.' I feel somewhat strange as we try to establish contact—he is leaning on the door while I am sitting on the lawn. I don't like 'looking up' to him while talking to him. 'Oh, I see, uhm' is his response. Besides that I am slowly realising that he really thinks I am a CLIENT. On the one hand I think, 'That's terrible!' On the other hand I think, 'Well, that's clear. Why not?' I stand up and look at my watch. It's already 8.20 a.m. I am gazing at the young man again and discover (from the corner of my eye) a woman approaching who is in her 40s. Is this my practice teacher? No, I don't think so. She is also holding a piece of paper in her hand. Does it also have something to do with this bill? The woman comes closer, she greets him and says, 'Today I will be discharged!' She turns to me and asks, 'Are you having to stay here for long?[8] I cannot remember you at all.' 'She also thinks of me as someone who is from here,' flashes through my mind. This has never happened to me before. Why not? ….

This is an example of an observational note in which something of the inner states of the actor/writer *during* the depicted events becomes visible. In her report the author subsequently discusses her own reactions in this situation. What she experienced can be regarded an unplanned, sudden and unsettling 'incongruity inducing procedure' as Harold Garfinkel (1963) might have called it, which brought home to her the power and stigma of the category of 'mental illness' and the quasi-naturalness of the contrast set of 'mentally ill' and 'normal'. She also reports how she became familiar with the local circumstances of the clinic and retrospectively discovered how she came to be mis-classified as a patient or client: her interaction partners had classified her as a co-patient on the basis of the strict dress code in the clinic for different categories of persons. At that time the student herself was not yet familiar with this dress code.

Student ethnographers only overcome their mental reservations and feel safe in writing their fieldnotes if they enter a process of 'learning by doing': a process in which observational interests and foci gradually crystallise and a personal style of writing fieldnotes develops. It is important that they make their notes accessible to their fellow students and to the instructor and get personal feedback on what these readers regard as especially interesting and what they think needs to be clarified and elaborated. My impression is that a lot of prior explanation doesn't really help students to overcome their insecurity. I can mention a few elements nevertheless which have turned out to be useful in producing fieldnotes. These have come to my awareness in a long process of supervising practice ethnographies of students of social work:

- They are advised to write their notes for *readers* whom they should assume (1) are not familiar with either the specific field of practice or the history of their work placement, (2) want to learn more about them—both as actors in the respective field and as writers who are retrospectively making sense of their experiences and reflecting on them, and (3) are sympathetic and not hostile. It always makes sense to ask oneself, 'Am I making myself sufficiently clear to readers who are not themselves insiders?' Passive constructions which transform activities into more or less anonymous events with unspecific actors ('The clients were informed …') should be avoided. (Who informed the clients?)

- It is important to *overcome the tendency to take things for granted*. One should systematically learn to be surprised and to adopt attention spans which are unusual in everyday life, e.g. in order to 'stumble over', to wonder about and to study phenomena which are either ignored, taken as a matter of course or just referred to in terms of self-evident programmatic abbreviations (like 'task-oriented', 'systemic', 'humanist psychology', etc.).

- The 'I' should be recognisable at different times: as actor in the respective (depicted) situation, and later on during the 'inscription' and reflection of one's own experiences. It should be possible to clearly differentiate between these points in time. One's own inner states should be expressed, also one's discomfort about what one has done or experienced. Accounts of experience should not be 'polished'.

- The focus of this work should be kept in mind. The student should *avoid giving in to the tendency to 'self-absorption'* that might be appropriate in writing a private diary.[9] The main focus for social work students needs to be the discovery of social processes in a professional field of action to which the writer belongs as actor.

- Student ethnographers are asked to systematically *focus on sequences* for the sake of discovering the order, but also the disorder of social processes ('cumulative mess' in the words of Anselm Strauss *et al.*, 1985, pp. 160–181). This means that they should avoid random impressions which could then be taken out of context and interpreted in a speculative fashion. The interest in sequence includes being sensitised to such developments as: (1) the unfolding of everyday conversation (by taking into account adjacency pairs and occurrences of their ruptures;[10] (2) the course of professional types of action (like a counselling session which can succeed or fail); (3) the development and dynamics of narrative and argumentation in certain types of action; (4) long-run collective processes; (5) the history of a relationship or a project, etc. The focus can be on recurring rhythms or on historically unique social processes.

- It is necessary to take into account and to differentiate the *perspectives of different actors*, e.g. different categories of professionals, clients, family members, etc., without being seduced or intimidated into privileging certain powerful and established perspectives as natural, authoritative and normal. Howard Becker (1967) addressed this issue when he coined the concept of a 'hierarchy of credibility'.

- The *language* of the field of action should be noted as such and differentiated from one's own observational language. The language of the field also consists of local terms of diagnosis, of informal typifications and of official and high-powered

concepts. By noting the native categories as such, e.g. by quotation marks, student ethnographers preserve their analytical distance from what counts as 'natural' and 'right' in local settings.

- Social processes, situations, organisational contexts, inner states and reflections should be presented in such a way that it is *possible for outside readers or 'non-initiates' to analyse the text by themselves*. It is important to keep in mind to what kind of analysis such texts lend themselves—in contrast to transcriptions of tape-recordings of ongoing interaction or of narrative interviews for example. There are specific limits, but also possibilities.

Of course the process of giving space to one's memories and to writing them down (as soon as possible after the relevant events) is already a process in which new ideas and insights are generated and recorded. But beyond that it is necessary to create a discursive setting conducive to achieving analytical distance and fostering processes of self-reflection and the discovery of 'blind spots'. Such an attempt is made in the practice analysis seminars already referred to. In these practice analysis seminars, students take turns in presenting their fieldnotes and receiving support in the production of their ethnographic final reports. A date is reserved for talking about the fieldnotes of each student (who is also given written feedback from the instructor). The work in such settings does entail criticism, but this should be and usually is delivered in a respectful and egalitarian manner. Criticism does not mean exposing or unmasking the writer. In order to achieve such an atmosphere and to ensure that each participant has the chance to present her or his fieldnotes at least once during a semester the size of the seminar should be rather small. In past evaluations students mentioned that taking turns in the presentation of fieldnotes—i.e. letting others learn about their experience and getting feedback—was essential in establishing an atmosphere of trust among them.

The work in such practice analysis seminars[11] consists of a number of steps:

- When a date has been arranged for a particular participant of the seminar it is her job to distribute the observational notes which she has selected from her field manual in time, so that the other members of the seminar have enough time for reading and preparation. (Students usually send fieldnotes as attachments by email.) She is also asked to provide some written background information on her work placement to make sure that her text can be sufficiently understood. All names of persons, institutions and places will have been changed so that identification is not possible. Such observational material always refers to an occurrence which is clearly marked and can be designated in a certain way: e.g. as 'the first day in the field of practice', 'a professional type of action' (like a counselling session, a clinical round, a team conference, etc.), 'the history of the relationship with a client', 'recurring processes of everyday life' (like table-talk in a shelter for homeless people), etc. The other participants of the seminar are expected to read the text carefully at home, to discover its sequential structure and to write down queries and make notes which they can offer in the seminar later on. It is easier to generate new insights and ideas in the practice analysis seminar if the fieldnotes are more differentiated and detailed. Students gradually learn that laconic notes just generate a host of questions and requests for deeper and more detailed field observations in the future.

- At the beginning of the session the student introduces the context and the overall experience of her work placement and answers questions from the other participants.
- Afterwards all students use their notes to share their comments on the overall text and ask questions. Such comments and questions refer both to elements of the presentation of data which strike them as significant—stylistic features, especially lively sequences, points of vagueness, contradictions, discrepancies, instances of a lack of plausibility—as well as to the processes, professional problems and contexts which are represented in the text. At this point the student writer is not supposed to comment on her fieldnotes herself, but she may respond to the remarks of the others if she wishes to do so. If the other participants have not invested enough time in working on the data material and in writing down their own comments and questions, the danger arises now and in the remainder of the session that the instructor becomes too dominant, i.e. that he or she 'floods' the discussion with his or her own interpretations and that consequent monologues contribute to an attitude among the students which is merely passive and receptive. Of course it is necessary once in a while that the instructor also shows how he or she analyses the text and arrives at insights. But it is better if this is done by building on and elaborating student contributions.
- The next phase consists of more microscopic analysis of certain sequences in the style of open coding (Strauss, 1987)[12] in order to learn how to develop generative questions and to tentatively designate interesting phenomena, i.e. to discover analytical concepts. The idea is (1) to understand the sequential structure of social processes, the perspectives of different interaction partners, and problems of professional action and ways of coping with them; (2) to formulate impressions about the experiences and interpretations of the student field researcher, i.e. impressions which refer to her former involvement in her work place and her retrospective commentaries in the process of writing down her fieldnotes; (3) to try to develop a non-normative critique of the practice (Riemann, 2002) that has become visible in the fieldnotes.
- Such a non-normative critique might be about a number of things. It might be about the lack of reciprocity in the relationship of professionals and clients, as revealed in put-downs and authoritarian interrogations. It might be about ruptures in the sequential order of work processes and types of action (e.g. counselling) and types of communication (i.e. the schemes of narration, argumentation and description: Kallmeyer & Schütze 1977): for example when a professional does not do justice to the dynamics of a scheme of communication and systematically or accidentally does things which are irritating for her interaction partner.[13] When the seminar participants are jointly engaged in detailed textual analysis, new questions, concepts and observational foci emerge which are helpful for the student ethnographer's further involvement in her work placement and for her retrospective reflections. At this juncture it is also possible to start thinking about possible crucial points that her final report should contain.
- The student ethnographer who has presented her fieldnotes is expected to write a summary of the seminar discussion in order to preserve and foster the habit of analytical distance from her own experience. Sometimes students use tape-recordings of the seminar discussion for writing summaries.

- The students write drafts of their ethnographic final reports that they give to the instructor and to the other students in order to get feedback for revisions. In discussing their drafts in the seminar the participants gradually realise which structure of the report makes best sense with regard to the specifics of their experience. In any case, it is important that a report reveals how the trainee has slowly become familiar with the field of practice and how her perspectives have gradually changed, but beyond that there is a wide variation in the complexity of the presentations. Some reports just focus on a certain recurring type of professional action (like sessions of group therapy in drug rehabilitation) whereas others include different levels of analysis: e.g. they deal with the everyday communication of clients in an institution, with certain types of professional action schemes, with the history of a relationship between a professional and a client and with biographies. Fieldnotes are integrated into the text. It is necessary that the data material and the analytical commentaries which refer to them can be distinguished (Schütze, 1994, p. 236; compare Wengraf, 2001, pp. 313–334).

Concluding remarks

I have the impression that most students who have gone through the process which I have described in this paper have profited from the attempt to make their own practice strange and have identified with this project, even if there are phases of insecurity and frustration in the beginning and in between. Many of them invest a lot of time and energy in their final ethnographic reports. Quite a few of them develop ideas for further empirical studies (their diploma theses), which I supervise in a student research workshop.

    The social arrangement of making one's own practice strange makes sense for the following three reasons:

1. It is helpful for the development of professional competencies and sensibilities which serve as a base for practical case analysis. The element of writing is especially important in this process of a detailed articulation of one's own experiences—in contrast to other forms of professional self-reflection like participation in supervision and Balint groups. As one student said in a joint evaluation: 'Only if I write it down do I really grasp it.'
2. When (future) social workers share and discuss qualitative data like self-reflective ethnographic fieldnotes they are drawn into a spontaneous and (hopefully) egalitarian professional discourse on their own work, its paradoxes and mistakes (Schütze, 1992a, 1996, 2000; Riemann, 2000, 2002). Practising such a discourse, which focuses on the details of the professional work itself and not just on programmatic issues, self-conceptions and evaluations is not unimportant for the collective development of the profession and its relationship with other professions. Very detailed, open and self-critical representation of and discursive reflection on the constitutive features and the consequences of professional practice should become a matter of course. However, something like this has to be organised and supervised if it is to last.

3. It is a process in which students take part in developing grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in certain fields of professional action. Their reports can be useful as resources in research-based training of future social workers. I suggest that especially the liminal phase of a trainee or 'novice' who is seriously engaged in acquiring professional competencies but has not yet become 'blinded by routine' is especially fruitful for the discovery of something new. Beyond that it should be remembered that fertile developments in the social sciences were often associated with transcending the 'natural' split between research and teaching. Dynamic student research was characteristic of the early Chicago sociology of the 1920s and 1930s of the twentieth century, but this style of work which was especially encouraged and established by Robert Park—and later on, Everett Hughes—was preserved by Anselm Strauss and other interactionists of the Chicago tradition.

Notes

1   I am very grateful for helpful comments and suggestions by Prue Chamberlayne, Thomas Reim, Fritz Schütze and Tom Wengraf.

2   The following observation is taken from a qualitative sociological study on social work counselling in families (Riemann, 2000). It is in the symbolic interactionist tradition of studying professions and work as developed by Everett Hughes (Hughes, 1984a) and Anselm Strauss (Strauss et al., 1985).

3   With proper training, people can learn to 'listen somewhat differently'.

4   How social work can benefit from this approach should have become apparent in the discussion of the introductory example of this paper.

5   A couple of years ago a student approached me wanting to write an essay about 'causes of alcoholism'. When I asked her how her interest in this topic had developed, I learned that before entering university she had lived in an American Indian reservation for quite some time, where she had encountered biographical and collective demoralisation (due to the destruction of the indigenous culture). She often thought about her American Indian friends and their personal turmoil, but there was no space in the university to talk about these difficult experiences. Instead, she transformed these experiences into the problem of 'the causes of alcoholism', i.e. she had learned to devalue the overall context of her own experience and to adopt decontextualised abstract terms that she had come to think suitable for an academic environment.

6   Colleagues of mine and I have introduced students to research in workshops designated as 'Research Workshop for Biographical Analysis, Interaction Analysis and the Analysis of Social Worlds' (Riemann & Schütze, 1987; Reim & Riemann, 1997). This is an arrangement in which students are assisted in conducting their own qualitative research projects. Since there are other aims and processes involved in this type of work, I will not discuss this arrangement in this paper.

7   'Du' (the informal term of address) is used in the German text.

8   'Sie' (the more formal and polite term of address) is used in the German text.

9   I also find this tendency to self-absorption in writings which have been referred to as 'auto-ethnography' (cf. Emerson et al., 2001, p. 361; Murphy & Dingwall, 2001, p. 345; Reed-Danahay, 2001, p. 407).

10   The term 'adjacency pair' which has been coined and used by conversational analysts (cf. Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) refers to a single sequence of utterances by different speakers, in which the first utterance (the 'first pair part') constrains the second utterance (the 'second pair part') in some way, i.e. it makes a certain type of response expectable. Instances of such pair types are question–answer, greeting–greeting, offer–acceptance/refusal, etc.

11   The following remarks are mainly based on my experience of working with undergraduate students in their third and fourth year of social work courses, who specialise in work with mentally ill patients and drug addicts. I have arranged together with a colleague (Jörg Wolstein), who is a psychiatrist, that this specialisation also includes a short work placement in the mental health field (either a couple of weeks in the semester break or a few hours per week over two semesters). By this time students have already been on a longer work placement of two semesters during their fourth and fifth semesters. These longer work placements can be situated in quite different fields of social work, not just mental health. I also encourage and supervise self-reflective practice ethnographies during these longer placements when the students spend most of their time in social work agencies, only returning to the university for short 'reflective' breaks. The procedures of such 'practice analysis seminars' can be compared to the English practice of 'institutional observation' (Hinshelwood & Skogstad, 2000).

12   'This open coding is done … by scrutinizing the fieldnote, interview, or other document very closely: line by line, or even word by word. The aim is to produce concepts that seem to fit the data. These concepts and their dimensions are as yet entirely provisional; but thinking about these results in a host of questions and equally provisional answers, immediately leads to further issues pertaining to conditions, strategies, interactions, and consequences. As the analyst moves to the next words, next lines, the process snowballs, with the quick surfacing of information bearing on the questions and hypotheses, and sometimes even possible crosscutting of dimensions. A single session with a single document can often astonish even the experienced researcher, especially when the document at first glance seemed not to promise much in the way of leads. The point is really that the potential is not so much in the document as in the relationship between it and the inquiring mind and training of a researcher who vigorously and imaginatively engages in the open coding' (Strauss, 1987, p. 28).

13   See the first section of this paper as to how this might happen.

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