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Decolonizing Social Science Methodology. Positionality in the German-Language Debate

Nina Baur *

Abstract: »Dekolonisierung sozialwissenschaftlicher Methodologie. Positionalität in der deutschsprachigen Debatte«. The debate on decolonizing the social sciences is intrinsically linked to debates about objectivity, subjectivity, and positionality because postcolonial scholars criticize the idea that “objective” knowledge is possible and argue that research findings are influenced by researchers’ subjectivity and *positionality*. However, when empirically addressing issues such as social or global inequality, objectivity and comparability would be direly needed. This dilemma is often hidden because the current postcolonial debate focusses on theory rather than methodology and methods and ignores differences in epistemic cultures. Using the German-language debates on objectivity and subjectivity, I illustrate that social science methodology has suggested some solutions to handling positionality, namely a reflexive methodology and an empirically-grounded epistemology, using social theory, using methods, and collaborating. I use my own research style to illustrate what applying these techniques might mean in research practice and point to some blind spots that methodological research should address in future research, amongst them reintegrating theory and methods, overcoming power structures in the global system of science, handling language, and decolonizing ethnography.

Keywords: Positionality, methodology, methods of social research, qualitative methods, quantitative methods, historical methods, mixed methods, decolonizing.

1. Decolonizing Social Science Methodology (in the German-Language Debate)

In current English-language sociological debates, especially in comparative and historical sociology, scholars demand more “epistemic freedom” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018) by “creolizing” (Shu-mei Shih and Lionnet 2011;

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Erasmus 2011; Boatcă 2021), “decolonizing” (Alatas 2001; Shalini and Römhild 2013; Conrad and Shalini 2013; Connell 2018; Patel 2021), “decentring” (Sinha 2003), and “indigenizing” (Alatas 2001; Onwuzuruigbo 2018) the social sciences and counteracting both Eurocentrism and – one should add – North-Americanism or Anglo-Saxonism in order to truly achieve a “global sociology” (Burawoy 2008; Patel 2014; Hanafi 2020). This debate on decolonizing the social sciences criticizes that current sociological research is dominated both by perspectives from scholars from the Global North and by empirical analyses focussed on the countries in the Global North, which in turn results in social theories being explicitly or implicitly built on the hypothesis that the Global North is either “normal” or “modern” and everything else is “deviant” or “yet to be modernized.” Given that only about 10% of the world population live in Europe and another 6% in the Anglo-Saxon countries, namely Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and the USA (own calculations based on UN 2019), this implies that both the problems and perspectives and the lifeworlds of 84% of the world population are mostly excluded from most sociological research and theory-building – so a decolonization in the sense of making non-Western social realities more relevant (Alatas 2001) is direly needed.

However, currently most of the debate on decolonizing the social sciences is focussed on social theory, either discussing about how to rethink theoretical concepts (e.g., Connell 2007; Connell, Beigel, and Ouédraogo 2017; Shalini and Römhild 2013; Conrad and Shalini 2013; Boatcă 2016, 2021; Bhambra, Medien, and Tilley 2020; Amelina et al. 2021; Patel 2021) or what alternative theoretical lineages exist (e.g., Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; Mignolo 2011; Maia and Ehlert 2014; Connell, Beigel, and Ouédraogo 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Onwuzuruigbo 2018; Costa 2019). In contrast, if one regards the current debate on decolonizing social science methodology, there are at least three *blind spots* that I will address in this paper:

1. *Methodology*: The decolonizing debate rarely asks if social science methods and methodology need to be decolonized too, and – if yes – how this is to be done.
2. *Discipline*: The decolonizing debate typically assumes that all social science disciplines are the same. However, concerning methodology, e.g., sociology, political sciences, anthropology, and historical sciences differ in their epistemic cultures (Reichmann and Knorr Cetina 2016) and accordingly have very different approaches towards methodology and epistemology. As a sociologist, I will focus on sociology in the following.
3. *Local Context*: Epistemic cultures do not only differ between disciplines but also between cultures, language communities, countries, and/or local contexts (Connell et al. 2017; Connell, Beigel, and Ouédraogo 2017; Collyer et al. 2019; Keller and Poferl 2020; Baur,

Mennell, and Million 2021). The decolonizing debate itself needs to be decolonized in the sense that – while it criticizes oversimplification and illegitimacy of subsuming so many very distinct cultures under the label “Global South” – it itself oversimplifies by labelling very different cultures as “Global North” and then focussing empirical analysis on the UK or the USA. Examples are Bhambra’s reflection on sociology (2016) and Brexit (2017) or Said’s (1994) discussion of “Culture and Imperialism.” In doing so, postcolonial scholars assume that philosophical, epistemological, and ontological beliefs on the role of and relationship between theory, methods, and positionality typical for French and US-American social scientists are shared by all social scientists in Europe and Anglo-Saxon countries.

These distinctions are in turn important because scholars from the Global North are often criticized for ignoring the debate on decolonizing the social sciences. While this may indeed be caused by provincialism, ignorance, or the wish to uphold existing power structures, a more likely explanation is that many scholars in the Global North simply feel not addressed. For example, as a German sociologist specialized in methodology, why would I feel personally addressed by a paper, e.g., criticizing US-American political theory? My argument therefore is that in order to be effective, criticism has to be more context-specific and better take into account existing bodies of knowledge and literature. For example, as I shall show, many of the issues identified in papers written by postcolonial thinkers have been subject of debate in German-language¹ sociological debates on methodology for somewhere between 100 and 150 years, and there have been solutions suggested. So criticizing scholars from this context for not being aware of issues of positionality and remnants of colonial thinking is missing the point. Rather, what these specific methodological debates would need is identification of and/or solutions for issues yet unresolved. As the decolonizing debate is not providing those, it is ignored for being “unhelpful.”

Therefore, in this paper I will discuss how the question of positionality has so far been handled in German-language discourse on social science methodology and what “decolonizing” would mean in this context. I will do this by using my own research as an example. I will start with briefly contrasting how

¹ I purposefully do not only speak about Germany but about the German-language community, which today at least includes Austria and Switzerland. This is important because, as I will state below, a language community also provides a specific system of thought and possibly culture, and in the case of social science academia, is also characterized by a specific discourse tradition with its own body of literature, some of which never has been translated. In addition, up to World War II, Germany (more specifically: Berlin) was at the centre of the global system of science, and while it has moved to the semi-periphery since (Baur 2016), some resilience to internationalization can be observed. In other words, German-language epistemic cultures from, e.g., French and American epistemic cultures are distinct up to today (Baur et al. 2018; Keller and Pofel 2020; Baur, Mennell, and Million 2021).

objectivity and positionality are typically handled in the German-language debate, contrasting it with the more well-known French- and English-language debates and introducing the concept of reflexive methodology. I will then conduct a reflexive methodology of myself both concerning my social position and the positionality of German-language sociology. Against this backdrop, I will discuss means of decolonizing social science methodology, starting with reviewing existing solutions, and then continuing with some blind spots and how I try to address them in my own research. I will end with questions we should ask in future methodological research in order to truly decolonize the social sciences. Note that this list is not and cannot be complete as the nature of a blind spot is that you cannot identify your own blind spots.

2. Objectivity and Positionality in the Debate on Social Science Methodology

The decolonizing debate is intrinsically linked to debates about objectivity, subjectivity, and positionality because, in a nutshell, postcolonial scholars criticize the idea that “objective” knowledge is possible and argue that research findings are influenced by researchers’ subjectivity and positionality. As most research is conducted from scholars in the Global North, this means that in social science research, typically only research questions are asked that are important to scholars in the Global North and addressed with theories suitable for the perspective of the Global North. As a result, the Global South is made invisible and research questions important to the Global South are either not posed or inadequately answered because they are addressed with unsuitable theories. This in turn results in reproduction both of global inequality in general and in inequality in the global system of science. Postcolonial researchers thus have stressed the importance of abolishing blind spots by increasing visibility of the excluded, be it within one’s “own” society or be it in “other” societies (Mohabeer 2021). This debate about the relationship between objectivity and positionality is not new but in fact older than the social sciences themselves, and it is closely linked to what is often termed as the “paradigm war” between “positivism” and “constructivism” (Bryman 1988) in English-language social sciences.

2.1 Positivism and the Belief in Objective Facts

Epistemological schools like nineteenth-century positivism (Bryman 1988) and later critical radicalism (Popper 1935) strongly stressed the need for “objectivity,” an early example being Émile Durkheim (1984 [1895]) who strongly influenced French and American sociology’s epistemological beliefs as well as political sciences and anthropology as a whole (Baur et al. 2018). The key

argument is that social science methodology should be as close as possible to natural science methodology by upholding the ideals of searching for truth, intersubjectivity, and empirical evidence. Any kind of relativism or constructivism is considered a fallacy because if social scientists do not uphold these ideals of objectivity and searching for truth, they cannot distinguish academic knowledge² from any other kind of knowledge.

In this line of thought, cross-cultural comparison serves as a substitute for experiments, and each country serves as a representative for a specific theoretical point (Baur, Mennell, and Million 2021). If one is – let us say – working with modernization theory, then prior to empirical analysis, some societies are defined and selected as examples for being “modern societies” and others for being “non-modern societies.” Moreover, in this tradition of thought, European and Anglo-Saxon societies are typically considered as “modern,” while all other societies are considered as “non-modern.” Methodologically, this means that in the a priori assumptions, a social hierarchy is engrained into research. By definition, this hierarchy degrades the Global South to being inferior and culturally backward (Baur, Mennell, and Million 2021). As it is an a-priori assumption, this hypothesis cannot be analysed or falsified by empirical research.

2.2 Constructivism and the Belief in Positionality and Perspectivity

Not only postcolonialism (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; Mignolo 2011) but also other epistemological approaches in the tradition of, e.g., radical constructivism (von Glasersfeld 1994), relationism (Kuhn 1962), postmodernism (Lyotard 1979/2009), anarchism (Feyerabend 1975), epistemological historicism (Hübner 2002), pragmatism (Johnson et al. 2017), phenomenology (Meidl 2009, 51-98), or critical theory (Adorno 1962, 1969, 1993; Habermas 1981) have argued that there is nothing like an “objective” truth or “objective” knowledge because all knowledge is at least partly influenced by subjectivity. Sociology of science has provided strong empirical evidence for this position (Baur et al. 2016).

Concerning methodology, the key arguments are that empirical findings are not only influenced by epistemic cultures – which, as stated above, differ both between disciplines (Reichmann and Knorr Cetina 2016) and countries (Connell et al. 2017; Collyer et al. 2019; Keller and Poferl 2020; Baur, Mennell, and Million 2021) – but also empirical findings are influenced by researchers’ social positions – both as people in the world system and as scholars in the global system of science (Baur et al. 2016): Science itself is a social system in its own right, resulting in a researcher’s class, (Laufenberg 2016), gender

² Note that in German the word “*Wissenschaft*” applies to both sciences and humanities and is closer to the English word “academia.” Therefore, in this paper, I use the words “academic” and “scientific” as synonyms.

(Hofmeister 2016), race (Baur 2016), age (Heinz, Briedis, and Jongmanns 2016), and health (Hergesell 2016) having an effect on their career status. Most importantly in the context of debates about decolonization, the global system of science has a firm centre-periphery-structure (Krücken 2016; Baier and Massih-Tehrani 2016; Connell, Beigel, and Ouédraogo 2017; Connell et al. 2017), and since World War II, the centre has shifted from Germany to the USA (Baur 2016), which today dominate the global system of science (Krücken 2016). In other words, if researchers find (dis)similarities between different social contexts, it is not clear at all if these (dis)similarities result from actual substantial differences or rather, e.g., from diverging theoretical perspectives, research styles, ways of doing methods, or different reactions of the field to social science research (Baur, Mennell, and Million 2021). As a result, scholars' theories and methods strongly influence the type of results they produce and this in turn influences our way of thinking about social reality (Bartl et al. 2019), as the use of digital data exemplifies (Baur et al. 2020).

In this line of argument, many postcolonial researchers have criticized academic knowledge production and suggested alternative ways of knowledge production (de Sousa Santos 2016; Patel 2010, 2021), such as making use of collaborative knowledge production (Arribas Lozano 2018) or using indigenous knowledge (Chilisa 2012; Smith 2012; Patel 2014; Onwuzuruigbo 2018).

However, this is problematic per se because in the end, it results in abolishing "*Wissenschaft*" (academic research), and there are good reasons why universities (Münch 2016) and academic research were established as independent from non-academic practice in the first place. In the context of this paper, the most important of these reasons is that – despite all its faults – academic knowledge production in the "Western tradition" is more efficient in handling positionality than other ways of knowledge production (Merton 1942[1973]). Put differently, giving up the methodological principles of academic research in the search for a universal truth – including the idea of "objectivity" – would pose a dilemma for social research because – although we can never achieve it – "objectivity" is necessary for two reasons:

1. First, if one denies the possibility of objectivity, it becomes impossible to distinguish "fake news" and "alternative facts" from academic findings.
2. As soon as anything is compared (Baur 2014a; Baur, Mennell, and Million 2021), the belief in the possibility of an "objective" comparison is invoked. Otherwise the comparison does not make sense. For example, when social inequality researchers or postcolonial thinkers claim that, e.g., Chad is poorer and more unequal than Germany, they do this based on empirical evidence such as the Human Development Index or the Gini Index. This in turn does only make sense if one believes in the possibility of "objective" comparison. As decreasing social and global inequality (Bashi Treitler and Boatcă 2016) is at the heart of the project

of decolonization, (not only but also) postcolonial researchers cannot give up the idea of “objectivity.”

In other words, social science methodology faces the dilemma that it needs objective knowledge, although it has been empirically proven that this is not possible. In the English-language debates, this dilemma has led to a deadlock in the methodological debate in the above-mentioned “paradigm wars” (Bryman 1988) between “positivism” or “modernism” and “constructivism” or “postmodernism,” and for at least 30 years, the debates have circled around the same arguments.

2.3 Reflexive Methodology

In contrast, the methodological debates, first in German-language sociology (Knoblauch et al. 2018; Baur et al. 2018; Baur, Mennell, and Million 2021) and more recently French-language sociology (e.g., Diaz-Bone and Didier 2016), have tried to move a step further and resolve this seeming contradiction and have begun thinking about ways of handling perspectivity or positionality (Baur et al. 2018; Baur, Mennell, and Million 2021). For example, Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu have suggested applying reflexive methodology, which consists of several steps (Baur 2017):

1. *Self-Reflexivity and Detachment*: When engaging in politics or practice, it is hard to both act and reflect upon one’s own positionality. In contrast, the “*Elfenbeinturm*” (ivory tower) of academic research at universities is rather effective at providing a context for self-reflection. Therefore, German-language sociology purposefully defines itself as “*Grundlagenwissenschaft*” (fundamental science), remaining detached from everyday life. However, this detachment can never be complete: As all social scientists are also part of the figuration/field they are analysing, they are at least partially bound by the knowledge and interests arising from their position in the overall power structure. Thus, any social analysis is limited. In order to avoid or at least minimize partiality, all researchers should start with reflecting their own perspectivity.
2. *Explicating Researcher’s Theoretical Perspective*: Every social theory³ contains epistemological assumptions, general concepts about what society is, which concepts are central to analysis (e.g., actions, interactions, communication), what the nature of reality is, what assumptions have to be made in order to grasp this reality, and how – on this basis – theory and data can be linked (Lindemann 2008; Baur 2009a, 2019). As theory guides methodology and is strongly influenced by specific research

³ In German, the words “*Sozialtheorie*” and “*Wissenschaftstheorie*” are much more similar than the English words “social theory” and “philosophy of science,” in the respect that they more strongly stress theory and the difference is much more fluent.

interests, both the specific research focus and theoretical perspective have to be explicated.

3. *Empirical Research* only takes place against this backdrop and uses methods of social research. For Elias and Bourdieu, it should ideally consist of periodization, reconstructing both micro- and macro-level change and identifying causal effects.
4. *Theoretical Synopsis*: Finally, all results have to be theoretically integrated. This not only means reflecting methodological blind spots but also achieving a more general model of social change.

2.4 Empirically-Grounded Epistemology

Although reflexive methodology is not as systematically applied in social research as it should, the idea is rather old. In recent years, amongst others, Hubert Knoblauch (2018, 2020a, 2020b) has argued that reflexive methodology does not suffice because it questions a researcher's positionality but not the positionality of a discipline within a specific socio-historical context itself – and the latter, too, is normative. So in different countries and at different times, sociology's epistemic culture might vary, and sociology might position itself differently with regard to (amongst others):

- its academic and societal relevance, normative positioning, and general legitimacy as well as concerning the role the social sciences play in society;
- what specific topics count as interesting and relevant;
- what role disciplinary, interdisciplinary, or even transdisciplinary orientation play and which disciplines social scientists typically cooperate with or are close to;
- the relationship between social theory and methods and methodology, which includes guidelines on how empirical evidence is legitimately gained and controlled and how facts gain the status of being “objective” and “valid”;
- the meaning ascribed to reflexivity and self-reflexivity, the role (self-) reflexivity plays in different phases of knowledge production; the merit ascribed to reflexivity with regard to questions of self-reflection and with regard to dealing with, approaching, and interacting with the research field and the stakeholders in the field; and the aspects of (self-) reflexivity researchers focus on in their conception of reflexivity.

In addition, the work and communication styles differ between disciplines and countries, and this might affect research results. Therefore, Knoblauch (2018, 2020a, 2020b) suggests to develop an “*empirisch begründete Wissenschaftstheorie*” (empirically-grounded philosophy of science and epistemology) as a countermeasure. This means that the model of reflexive methodology has to be expanded:

1. *Empirically-Grounded Epistemology*: Researchers not only reflect upon but empirically analyse – e.g., by using ethnography of science or historical analyses of science – a specific epistemic culture, that is: how is science done in a specific socio-historical context?
2. *Self-Reflexivity and Detachment*
3. *Explicating Researcher's Theoretical Perspective*
4. *Empirical Research*
5. *Theoretical Synopsis*

3. An Example for Reflexive Methodology and Empirically-Grounded Epistemology

To sum up the argument so far, within the German-language social science methodology debate, scholars have argued that two aspects of a researcher's positionality have to be distinguished. They have also suggested two methodological procedures for disentangling them: (1) reflexive methodology aims at assessing a researcher's position both in the world system and in the global system of science, and (2) empirically-grounded epistemology aims at identifying the properties of the specific epistemic culture the researcher is part of. In combination, these methodologies help to reveal both the specific bodies of knowledge a researcher draws on and what power the researcher has to act upon these bodies of knowledge. If these two procedures were systematically applied, this would be a big step towards decolonizing the social sciences within academia. As this sounds rather abstract, in this section, I will use my own research style as a case study for applying both reflexive methodology (mostly based on phenomenological introspection and auto-ethnography) and empirically-grounded epistemology (based on both my own research on sociology of science and the debates on history and sociology of German-language sociology). Note that both analyses are limited, especially by my own positionality, and the resulting blind spots – a point that I will come back to later.

3.1 Reflexive Methodology: Nina Baur's Positionality

Reflecting on my own position in the world, I have always been privileged: I am an upper-middle-class woman from Southwest Germany. For the debate on decolonizing the social sciences, this is important because the Southwest is where German human-rights-orientated liberalism originated from, and it is one of the heartlands of Lutheranism and the Protestant ethic. The Southwest has also a strong tradition of philosophy of science. For example, Hegel and other dialectical thinkers originated from the Southwest.

Compared to the rest of Germany, the Southwest's social structure is characterized by flatter social hierarchies and more intergenerational social mobility. For example, in my family, there have always been artisans, workers, mathematicians, artists, but also small entrepreneurs, university professors, and even politicians. However, there is no single family strand with a specific job tradition. Instead, the social cards have been reshuffled every generation: In one generation, one part of the family might be climbing up, the another might be dropping down the social ladder. Although none of my female relatives would call it that, my family has always had a strong tradition of feminism, with women being respected for being clever and competent.

Being a poor area in the past, the Southwest has had a long history of out-migration, and in my own family, between the 1920s and 1940s, large parts emigrated to the USA and one of my great-grandfathers to Latin America. Since the 1960s, the Southwest has been one of the major immigration areas of West Germany and thus today, has one of Germany's highest and – in the sense of intermarriage – best-integrated immigrant populations. For my family, mobility has taken a new angle, as I myself have experienced a lot of international mobility from an early age. Due to my father's job, I spent parts of my childhood both in the United States and the UK. In the 1990s, I studied a year in the UK, and since the 2000s, I have travelled widely and extensively to more than sixty countries, mostly in Europe, North America, Asia, and the South Pacific. Note that I have a blind spot for Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. In the beginning, traveling simply arose from a general interest in the world. Later on, it took the form of ethnographical traveling and became one of my methodological principles – a point I will come back to later.

I believe that this social positioning is one of the reasons why I ended up becoming a (historical) sociologist, probably like many of my co-sociologists dreaming of providing the knowledge to help to decrease global inequality. As the empirical evidence I know points to the economy as the main cause for creating, stabilizing, and reproducing social inequality, my main substantial research field is economic sociology – and being German, I ended up studying sociology at a German university, namely the University of Bamberg. Other universities I have studied or worked at were those of Lancaster, Hamburg, Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, and Berlin, which means that my positionality is not only shaped by my social but also by my specific disciplinary background and its specific epistemic culture, which I will try to entangle in the next section by applying empirically-grounded epistemology.

3.2 Empirically-Grounded Epistemology: German-Language Sociology's Positionality

As most of German-language sociologists are part of the German system of science, it is important to note that the German-language system of science

was (re-)invented by Alexander von Humboldt and is strongly based on sharing knowledge, both in publications ideally being made available to everyone and by every professor both doing research and teaching to train the next generation – as a rule, the most experienced and the best should do the most basic training, and ideally junior and advanced researchers are supposed to be intellectual sparring partners by asking questions.

Within this system of science, there were two founding moments for German-language sociology, represented by the parallel founding of two professional associations (Baur et al. 2018).

In the nineteenth century, German society faced huge social change, induced by the political revolutions, industrialization, and urbanization. The latter resulted in an increase of poverty and rise of the population. In early suggestions of how to address these issues, Manchester liberalism (“Laissez-faire liberalism”) and Marxism (Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels) opposed each other. The so-called “Historische Schule der Nationalökonomie” (“Historical School of Economics”) tried to find some middle ground between these positions and founded the “Verein für Sozialpolitik” (“Association of Social Policy”) in 1873. In other words, in those times, historical sciences and economics were closely entangled. Sociology originated from this historical-oriented economics when scholars like Max Weber aimed at solving the social problems of their “own” national society of the time. In addition to being trained in historical methods, these early sociologists typically spoke several languages (German, French, English, Latin, and maybe one to two other languages), so they could read the original works of their colleagues in other European countries.

In parallel, the German-language system of science was divided by the above-mentioned epistemological debate between positivism and constructivism, which in 1909 resulted in a split of the “Verein für Sozialpolitik” into the “Verein für Sozialpolitik” – focussing on substantial issues – and the “Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie” (“German Sociological Association”) – focussing on more theoretical and methodological issues. Many scholars (like Max Weber) remained members in both associations. In other words, the German Sociological Association was founded on epistemological critique resulting from the so-called “Werturteilsstreit” (“debate on value judgments”).

Between the late 1890s and the 1920s, Gustav Schmoller and other key proponents of positivism argued that like French sociology, German-language sociology should model itself as a natural science. This position reflected typical methodological practices of the times: Scholars in public administrative statistics and in economics typically used big data such as census data and other public administrative data, which they quantitatively analysed using statistics (Baur 2009b; Baur et al. 2020). Like many current scholars using digital data, they strongly believed that these data were a “true” measurement of the “full population” in real life. Historical scientists – namely the school of

historicism (“Historismus”) – typically used qualitative methods such as case studies (Baur 2005, 23-56). Similar to current science and technology studies (STS) and anthropology, they believed that the cases reflected “truth.” Both research strands believed strongly in objectivity and argued that data “speak for themselves” and do not need to be interpreted (Baur et al. 2018).

Early critics showed that both positions cannot be upheld: For quantitative research, they showed that all categories used, e.g., in administrative data (or today: digital data) are predefined by data producers such as governments and policymakers (or today: multinational companies). This predefinition is necessary because otherwise, one cannot collect quantitative data. However, it means that the world-views of the data producers are engrained in the categories and automatically produce blind spots. Similarly, data producers produce blind spots in how they define the population and how data are collected (Baur 2009b; Baur et al. 2020). The same line of criticism applies for qualitative research. Basically, cases do *not* speak for themselves. What unreflected single case studies do is they reproduce the power structures of the field by only telling one perspective – typically that of the most dominant actors in the field. In the nineteenth century, the so-called “*Ereignisgeschichte*” (“history of events”) told the histories of famous personalities (Baur 2005, 23-56) – who today are called “old white men.” The story of, let us say, an elderly African woman is likely to be untold. Methodologically, the point is that it is not always the noisiest person that is the most typical or important one. This criticism applies both, let us say, to an elderly white upper-class male professor in the Global North and to a young black female activist in the Global South: both are in danger of forgetting the invisible, voiceless, less powerful actors, and both world history and social inequality research point to fact that the persons most likely to be forgotten are poor uneducated women living in deprived areas.⁴

Based on this criticism of positivism, in the course of the German-language “*Werturteilsstreit*” during the 1890s and the 1920s, Rudolf Goldscheid and other constructivists opposed this position and argued that sociology should be a humanity and also do normative research. However, this implied the disadvantages mentioned in section 2.2.

Therefore, Max Weber, Werner Sombart, and others argued that sociology should take a middle ground⁵ and become a “*Kulturwissenschaft*” (“cultural science” or “social science”). In other words, German-language sociology has always been interpretive (Knoblauch et al. 2018). As a result of this debate,

⁴ Note that a similar argument has been made in French sociology since the 1970s, for example, by Bourdieu and Economics of Convention.

⁵ Note that in German, the word “*Wissenschaft*” applies to both sciences (“*Naturwissenschaften*”) and humanities (“*Geisteswissenschaften*”), which make it much easier to discuss, if epistemologically, whether the social sciences (“*Sozialwissenschaften*”) are sciences, humanities, or need to go on a “third way” or tread a middle ground.

Max Weber wrote his key epistemological and methodological contributions, which became key documents for the self-identity of German-language sociology. What is important for the debate on decolonizing social science methodology⁶ is that the strong belief that – while we need objective knowledge – there is no such thing as objective knowledge, and that using data unreflectively reproduces power structures of the field, was deeply enrooted in the discipline from the start. This is where the postcolonial critique cuts short. It criticizes German-language sociologists for having a belief they typically do not have. What they differ on is not the belief in the *possibility* of “true measurement” but the belief in its *necessity*.

According to Weber and many later sociologists, despite its impossibility (and as a countermeasure to radical constructivism), it is important for the social sciences to uphold the *ideal* of objectivity and the *search* of truth. For example, most German-language quantitative researchers are well aware that their data are constructed. They might not like it, but they accept this as a given fact. In addition, interpretation and sense-making (“*Verstehen*”) and causal analysis (“*Erklären*”) are also closely related (Baur 2018). So how do you resolve the dilemma of needing something (objectivity) you can never achieve, and what does this mean for sociological research?

1. *Social Inequality and Substantial Research Fields*: In its self-definition (and true both to its roots in economics and following the tradition of nineteenth-century debates culminating in the founding of the “Verein für Sozialpolitik”), German-language sociology aims at providing knowledge for solving society’s problems. This has almost always primarily meant thinking about how to reduce social inequality and reflecting about the influences of the economy on society. In addition, there have always been other topics considered as relevant in the specific historical context. For example, after World War II, sociology of housing and urban sociology were very important because the knowledge they provided was needed to rebuild the destroyed cities. Sociology of work and organization was considered important for democratizing workplaces. Political sociology was considered essential for democratizing a totalistic society. In contrast, since the PISA-studies in the 2000s, educational research has become important. Since the “refugee crisis” in 2015, sociology of migration and ethnicity have been on the rise, and so on. In other words, it depends on a current society’s self-conceived problems what kind of issues are considered as

⁶ Note that just because scholars like Weber were well aware of their own positionality, this did not prevent them from falling into the trap: In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, German academics were as racist and colonialist as any other European scholars and engaged in the colonial project both in their theories of society and in their political practice (Zimmerman 2001, 2005, 2013), which includes Max Weber (Boatcă 2013). However, this criticism of their theoretical perspective does not devalue their methodological points.

important. In this sense, I am a very typical and “traditional” member of my epistemic community: As reflexive methodology revealed (section 3.1), my primary research interest is how the economy reproduces social inequality in order to identify ways of breaking global power structures.

2. *Academia and Practice*: In order to handle partiality, German-language sociology draws a sharp line between “academia” (or “science”) and “practice” (or “non-science”). Science’s task is providing sound empirical evidence, theorizing and reflecting upon one’s roles as a researcher. Any type of practical implementation, including applied research and politics, is non-science. While single persons can take both roles and consider both “*Wissenschaft als Beruf*” (“science as a profession/calling”; Weber 1919a) and “*Politik als Beruf*” (“politics as a profession/calling”; Weber 1919b), they need to be clearly and sharply distinguished. For example, in my academic role, I myself am part of the Collaborative Research Centre on the “Re-Figuration of Spaces” and other fundamental research. At the same time, as a practitioner, I am a member of a political advisory report for the German Council of Consumer Affairs of the German Government. So, I have two roles with distinct epistemological practices, and depending on context, I switch my modes of thought.
3. *Interdisciplinarity*: As stated, during its institutionalization, German-language sociology was always intended as a complimentary discipline, originally to historical sciences and economics, meaning that a “good sociologist” always works in an interdisciplinary context. This has not changed that much, the only difference being that different sociologists collaborate with different types of disciplines. Also, the typical collaborations have changed, the most typical collaborations today probably being the humanities, psychology, and educational sciences. Again, I myself am a typical German-language sociologist, systematically collaborating with other researchers (section 4.3).
4. *Handling (Self-)Reflexivity*: Since its founding, German-language sociology has tried to find solutions on how to handle (self-)reflexivity. Due to the Humboldtian ideal of combined research and teaching, Weberian epistemic beliefs were engrained into everyday research practice and basic undergraduate training of sociologists the moment sociology was institutionalized as an academic discipline. This means they both became part of the disciplinary habitus of a “good sociologist” and are very easy to miss for someone who was not socialized in this specific academic context. The earliest solutions for handling (self-)reflexivity were stressing the importance of both theory and methods as tools for handling reflexivity and self-reflexivity. Theory and methods each have different roles:

- a. *Theory* is meant as an exercise of thought. Basically, it is a collective endeavour in improving reflexivity by formulating your perspectives and discussing them. You can formalize and integrate reflexivity into academic debates, illuminate what kind of blind spots you have, and thus transform partiality into perspectivity (Baur 2008a).
- b. *Methods* are techniques for providing data that are as objective as possible. Data are essential for theory-building because only if theories are empirically grounded can they be distinguished from fiction. Methods also provide techniques of improving and training reflexivity. For the latter reason, methodological training has always included training in epistemology and philosophy of science – this has only changed in the last ten or fifteen years in the course of the Bologna reforms. When I myself went to university in the 1990s, being trained in methods of social research meant basically being trained in epistemology and philosophy of science. As today I am a professor for methods of social research, part of my task in teaching is socializing the next generation into upholding and defending the epistemic beliefs of my discipline, so for anyone criticizing these beliefs, I am part of the problem, and so unsurprisingly, in interdisciplinary and cross-cultural discourse, I often have to serve as reflective foil and token for imagined and factual epistemic battles.

While there was a general agreement in that theory and methods are important for handling (self-)reflexivity, concerning the *relationship between theory and methods*, different schools of thoughts suggested different solutions in the 1920s. These schools of thought ranged from historical sociology – for example, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, or Norbert Elias – critical theory (“Frankfurt School”), or phenomenology and sociology of knowledge – for example, Alfred Schütz and Karl Mannheim. They had in common that they all argued that theory and methods are related and can neither be separated from each other nor from the specific research field, resulting in what today would be called the “research triangle” – a point that postcolonial theorists like Connell (2007) have also made when arguing that postcolonial theories are not only theory but also methodology.

In the 1960s, a second epistemological debate followed – the so-called “*Positivismus-Streit*” (“positivism war”) – which again arose around the issue about how to handle positionality. The debate was not resolved, but because it was threatening to divide the discipline, it was simply stopped. As a result – while there had been continuous and intense methodological debates up to the 1960s – since the 1960s, there have been hardly any epistemological debates, and the issues discussed 60 years ago remain unresolved today. The key point of debate was on how to best handle partiality (“*Parteilichkeit*”) and

positionality – today, one would ask: How does one decolonize social science methodology? This in turn means that most of the solutions applied in current German-language sociology to handle partiality and positionality are those suggested between the 1890s and 1930s.

This does not mean that there have not been any developments in the field of epistemology and philosophy of science. On the contrary, the range of schools of thought known and read in German-language sociology is much wider than that of most English-language debates, ranging from phenomenology and pragmatism – like Alfred Schütz (1932), Peter L. Berger, and Thomas Luckmann (1966) – critical rationalism – like Karl Popper (1935) – critical theory (“Frankfurt School”) – like Theodor W. Adorno (1962/1969/1993) and Jürgen Habermas (1981) – neo-positivism and evolutionary philosophy of science – like Hartmut Esser (2001, 2002, 2006, 2018a, 2018b), or the newly founded “Akademie für Soziologie” (“Academy for Sociology”) – to constructivism – like Niklas Luhmann (1992, 2009) – relativism, and relationism – like Thomas S. Kuhn (1962), Imre Lakatos (1976), and Paul Feyerabend (1975).

In parallel and as discussed in section 2, since the 1960s, sociology of science has increasingly conducted more empirical research. In Germany, sociology of science was strongly influenced by Robert K. Merton (1942[1973]), who argued that for academic knowledge production, the social organization of science is important. Sociologists of knowledge – for example, Reiner Keller and Angelika Pöferl (2020) – have argued that not only the organization of science, but also different epistemic cultures influence results. French methodology, especially via Pierre Bourdieu’s reflexive methodology, reinstated topics about positionality and self-reflexivity. Economics of Convention have reintroduced the idea of the power engrained in methods. Meta theory, STS, and actor-network theory have contributed to showing how this influences doing science. My own Ph.D. supervisor’s work – Gerhard Schulze – and Hubert Knoblauch’s contribution have added to this debate by claiming that these lines of thought need to be linked, and as stated above, Knoblauch has argued for an empirically-grounded philosophy of science, trying to establish ethnography of science as a method.

Linking the postcolonial debate on decolonizing the social sciences and the German-language sociological debate on positionality, most German-language sociologists would likely agree with the key theoretical arguments made by postcolonial theorists, as in German-language sociology, there has been a long discourse on and discussion of positionality as a problem. This debate has illustrated that if you do not handle these blind spots, there are typically two main effects that are equally bad for science and individual researchers:

1. *Social Inequality*: People and scholars who are in less powerful positions are excluded from academic discourse. On a global scale, this means

that most academic research is currently done by about 16% of scholars from the Global North and everybody else in the world is excluded. This not only negatively impacts individual researchers' career chances but also means for the social sciences as a whole that the typical questions that would be asked from this specific perspective are not being asked, namely, questions that are relevant to the Global South. As a result of these specific exclusions, the least research is done in the places in the world that face the highest degrees of inequality and the most pressing social problems.

2. *Social Theory*: Even empirically-grounded theories are developed from a "Western" point of view. If taken seriously, this might have fundamental consequences, as my own ethnographic experience gives me the impression that Europe and the Anglo-Saxon countries are the exception and not the rule on how societies typically function. This basically would mean that the social theory needs to be completely rethought.

3.3 Linking Reflexive Methodology and Empirically-Grounded Epistemology

Linking the findings of reflexive methodology on myself and empirically-grounded epistemology on German sociology, for the discussion on the relationship between positionality and decolonizing science methodology, several issues seem to be relevant.

Firstly, I was likely drawn to sociology as it resonated both with my primary socialization and my personal interests, such as an interest in the economy, history, maths, and affinity for philosophy of science. For a middle-class woman in my family tradition, it was also "a natural thing to do" to go to university. As a result of German-language sociology's specific epistemic culture, these interests were reinforced in the course of my academic career, and so I have entered what can be seen as the heart of German-language sociology, exemplified by my research interests in methodology, the economy, and social inequality. For the debates on decolonizing the social sciences, this is important, as analysing the effects of the economy on global inequality from a historical-sociological perspective is one of the key topics in postcolonial theory. However, while most postcolonial thinkers are focussed on theory, as a methodologist, naturally, I mainly reflect upon methodology and methods, which is the whole point of this paper.

Secondly, part of both my primary socialization and academic training was based on the idea that – true to the idea of Hegelian dialectics – it is often fruitful to neither faithfully accept all traditions (thesis) nor to fervently adhere to all new ideas (antithesis), but instead to search for a synthesis.

This is true for my own biography. For example, when I was a young woman, it was still a very strong everyday belief (not only but also at universities) that women could not do maths, methodology, or epistemology. This was reflected in sociology's disciplinary structure: While every single one of the maybe fifty sociology departments in Germany has at least one chair of methods of social research and the section on methods of social research of the German Sociological Association had about a hundred members at the time, when I started my Ph.D. thesis, there were only two female professors that I knew of among these chairs and only three women that were regularly participating in meetings (one of them was me). My primary socialization has provided me with the resources to break the rule that "female sociologists don't do methods." So today, I am a professor at a university in the Global North – maybe not in the centre but at least at the semi-periphery of the global system of science. And while I myself never have been racially discriminated against and will never truly know what it is like to originate from the Global South, from my personal biographical experience, I believe that I can at least feel some empathy, as I know what it feels like to stick out and be singled out as "the only one" and criticized for having a different perspective.

My belief in the need for balancing out the old and the new is also true for the specific stance I take on the debate on decolonizing the social sciences: I strongly believe that for decolonizing the social sciences, it is important that more scholars and ideas from the Global South are included into academic discourse. However, I do not believe that *all* the traditions and arguments of German-language sociology are outdated or should be ignored henceforth. Instead, I believe that it would be more fruitful to find a synthesis between "the old" and "the new." Both German-language sociology and postcolonial theory agree that in order to decolonize social science methodology, it is central to handle positionality. And, as I have tried to elaborate in sections 1 and 2, here, the debate on decolonizing the social sciences is currently lacking, in the sense that the debate has identified the problem but is not offering many solutions in handling positionality that do not involve giving up academic research in the first place. In contrast, with reflexive methodology and empirically-grounded epistemology, German-language sociology has provided some suggestions for identifying positionality.

4. Handling Positionality in Research Practice

German-language sociological debates have also pointed out that identifying researchers' positionality does not suffice – researchers also have to develop countermeasures because otherwise, researchers' subjectivity will distort empirical findings. So how can one handle these typical blind spots created by subjectivity and especially partiality and perspective as a whole or as an

individual researcher in research practice? In my own research, I am using a set of existing solutions for handling blind spots that have been developed and refined in over a hundred years of German-language social science research, namely using social theory, using methods of social research, and collaborating.

4.1 Using Social Theory

The first countermeasure for handling perspectivity and partiality is social theory (Baur 2019): Social theory helps to reflect which blind spots exist and to make explicit blind spots one creates when focussing on specific parts of social reality in research practice, which in turn makes it easier for others to criticize these blind spots. If social theory is empirically grounded – and in my experience, all good theory is empirically grounded – theory can be considered as condensed meta-analysis of empirical findings of past generations of social scientists.

In my own research, although by denomination of my chair I am a methodologist, I do like to read theory widely. As the body of social science literature is not only ever-increasing but already larger than I could ever read in my whole life, I use the concept of theoretical sampling (Seale 1999, 87-105; Corbin and Strauss 2015) as a strategy for selecting texts I read: Usually when I am reading on a topic, I start with the most promising paper and then I continue reading that which was promising and providing me with the best insights. This means that I would select contrasting papers from different theoretical angles or perspectives.

In doing so, I might get new insights by using different theories or taking other fields of research into account that might interlink. For example, as I have shown in Baur (2008b, 2013), depending on which sociological theory one uses, what “a market” is and what type of questions one asks about a market varies widely. Based on these findings, I have found my own personal definition of markets as complex chains of interactions, where actors exchange money and goods along the commodity chain and compete with each other within a specific segment of the commodity chain (Baur 2014b).

Reading widely also helps me to identify similarities between seemingly divergent theories. For example, for the purpose of my research interest in markets, sociology of knowledge (Knoblauch 2017), economics of convention (Diaz-Bone 2015), and the theory of intrinsic of logics of cities (Berking and Löw 2008) are very similar. This in turn makes it a lot easier to borrow ideas from all research traditions. For my analyses of the economy, of these three theories, I most often use economics of convention because they provide the most differentiated concepts for the type of questions I ask. However, I feel free to add ideas from the other theories if they improve the type of questions I ask.

Another way I use theory for handling perspectivity is by running divergent theories against each other, and there are basically two ways to do so: In quantitative research, this is basically done by hypothesis testing, as we have done in Heidenreich and Baur (2015) when asking why specific localities manage to attract headquarters of multinational companies (MNCs) and others do not (which in turn has an effect on social inequality both within and between regions). When applying qualitative methods, historical methods, or mixed methods, I rather use contrasting theories to improve interpretations, to ask different questions about the same research question, and to address different parts of the problem. For example, in a project on the hairdressing and barbering market, we used economics of conventions to analyse differences in local bodies of knowledge and social practices. In doing so, we could show that localities differ concerning what people consider as the aims of the economy, as “professional” work, and how they do time and space (Baur et al. 2014). In the same project, we used figurational sociology to analyse how structures and knowledge are linked in the *longue durée* as well as how cities cope with economic crises and how this coping can only be grasped by understanding a city’s past (Baur and Hering 2017a).

4.2 Using Methods of Social Research

The second countermeasure proposed for handling the issue of perspectivity are methods of social research. As I have discussed in section 3.2 and in contrast to a common misconception, the key aim of methods is not providing knowledge on specific data collection or analysis techniques – that is a side effect. The key aim of methods – at least from the German-language perspective – is being a countermeasure for handling perspectivity and transforming partiality into perspectivity. There are several ways in which I personally use methods in my own research in order to further this aim:

1. *Tailoring a Research Design to the Research Question*: My knowledge of methodology and methods helps me to decide which particular research method I should best use for creating knowledge on a specific research field and what the advantages and disadvantages of using these methods in contrast to others are. In this context, I continuously both improve my *theoretical and practical skills on methods* I already know and learn new methods. As methods are tools, in my experience, it is much more useful for research practice, if one knows contrasting methods (such as social hermeneutics, historical source analysis, biographical research, content analysis, survey methods, experimental methods and digital methods) than similar methods (such as ten different variants of doing hermeneutics or experiments): a broad knowledge will allow researchers to address different types of research questions and to select the methods and data best suited for answering a specific

research question, instead of having to tailor the research question to the methods one knows, as is often done in research practice. More importantly, I continuously compare the *advantages or disadvantages of various methods*. To further this goal, I have written texts and/or co-edited handbooks both on methods in general (Baur and Blasius 2019 [2014]; Akremi et al. 2018), and on applying methods to specific research fields I am currently working on, such as process-oriented sociology (e.g. Baur 2005; Ametowobla et al. 2015; Baur 2017; Norkus and Baur 2020; Stamm et al. 2020), spatial sociology (e.g. Thierbach et al. 2014; Sept and Baur 2020; Baur, Mennell, and Million 2021) or market sociology (Baur 2011; Baur 2017). In every research project, I do not only conduct a substantial analysis but also *reflect what I can learn methodologically* from this. For example, in one of my projects (Baur et al. 2014), we analysed the hairdressing and barbering markets from the point of view of economic of conventions – i.e. social practices –, and if I had had to choose a single method, my method of choice would have been ethnography because it works much better than interviews for analysing social interactions. However, in the same project, interviews served well to analyse motives and knowledge. In fact, in this project, we mixed both methods, and methodological reflection not only revealed that – as assumed – both methods complemented each other but also that interviews were lacking because many everyday practices were so self-evident to actors that they did not even think about them and therefore were not able to express them in interviews (Baur and Hering 2017b). As any theory has methodological implications, I have also worked a lot *on how to link theory, methods and data* (e.g. Baur 2005; 2008; 2009a; 2009b; Baur et al. 2018), and from the same project I learned a lot about how to improve a process-oriented methodology from the point of view of figurational sociology (Baur 2017).

2. *Self-Reflexion*: In addition to these specific techniques and thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of specific ways of doing research, one of the most important tasks of social science methodology is providing tools for self-reflection. In this context and due to my strong interest in positionality, I have both analysed on how we can and should interpret data (Akremi et al. 2018), how the global system of science is structured and influences who will end up on which academic position as well as how we collectively organize doing research (Baur et al. 2016) and how this influences, for example, our comparative practices (Baur, Mennell, and Million 2021), which in the end produce seemingly “objective facts” (section 2.2). As discussed in section 3.2, the way I was trained, (self-)reflection is an *everyday activity that is engrained in the everyday practice of doing social sciences*. This involves self-questioning as an everyday habit of continuously checking if one has maybe

missed a point. Students are not only indoctrinated to self-reflect during social sciences methodology training, but some methodological research traditions have also suggested specific techniques for handling self-reflection. For example, in Corbin and Strauss's (2015) "Introduction to Basics of Qualitative Research," in which they introduce grounded theory, they dedicate a whole chapter to the techniques for *theoretical sensitizing* that can be used when not sure if you have missed the point. I am using all of these techniques at some point in my own research. Furthermore, and although this might sound very "unscientific" or "unacademic," I have found that – if made use of in the right way – *emotions* can be very useful in social research: Social scientists are supposed to be emotionally detached and take an analytical stance, and this is trained during university. Regardless, this detachment sometimes fails at the unseemliest times: In the context of a simple self-evident everyday practice, we might react emotionally. The emotional reaction itself poses a problem as it is a sign of partiality. However, it can be turned into an analytical advantage once one starts asking: "Why am I acting emotional here? Which blind spot was hit?" In a similar way and true to the Humboldtian ideal, for me, *teaching* is a very important way of methodologically reflecting on my own perspectivity. Every year, first-year students who have very fresh eyes on research ask me: "Why are we doing this this way?" While for many questions I might have an answer, each year at least once I am tempted to answer: "because we have always been doing it like this!" In my experience, these are exactly the points worth looking into because it is not only a dumb answer but also – while there might actually be good reasons for doing things in a specific way and we might simply have forgotten – it often points towards a blind spot or an issue worth reflecting upon because in the course of social science history, someone just decided to do it in a specific way and no one ever questioned the decision.

3. *Self-Alienation via Ethnographic Traveling*: A third way I apply methods for self-reflexion is self-alienation ("*Selbstbefremdung*"; Hirschauer and Amann 1997; Knoblauch and Vollmer 2019) via ethnographic traveling in a very unsystematic way in a very early stage of research. As stated in section 3.1, this started out as a pure interest in the world and became more systematic about 15 years ago. Since then, I have tried to explore a different cultural context each year. The aim of these stays is not doing research on the other culture or writing about it – on the contrary. The aim is sensitizing myself for the peculiarities of my own culture by going someplace else. By learning about another culture and taking it seriously, I learn a lot about my own culture. In order to be most effective, this way of travelling needs to meet several prerequisites: The stay should be extended (at least a month) in order to have enough time to

get a feeling for the culture and trying to untangle parts of it. You need to get out of the comfort zone – instead of going to nice international hotels in expat enclaves in tourist hubs standardized and adjusted to Anglo-Saxon “global” tastes, which have a kind of sameness, communities, quarters, and places of residence should be as local as possible, and in most cultures, one should walk or use public transport instead of driving by car in order to get as much contact with ordinary people’s everyday lives as possible. Linger, watching, and strolling are important, too. One should also not be afraid of people – in my experience, people notice if you are genuinely interested in them.

4.3 Collaboration

While the techniques for handling positionality I have suggested so far can be conducted by individual researchers, they have their limits. Basically, although researchers can reflect about their own blind spots, the nature of a real blind spot is that one is not aware of having it. So you will always need *other* people to point out your blind spots. There is a reason why science is organized as a collective effort. To me, collaboration within science is mandatory – especially for the social sciences – for handling subjectivity and perspectivity. There are several ways of collaborating: I collaborate both within the team, in my research unit and in my department, and with colleagues from outside of my team who might enlighten my blind spots and compensate for my own weaknesses. There are several types of collaboration and several types of people with whom I collaborate:

- The first way of collaborating is *exchanging ideas*, for example, discussing which literature is worth reading, giving hints to each other. Discussion with colleagues can also be used for sensitizing one’s own perspective and perspectivity. This can take place both on an everyday working level, but also at conferences or via publications.
- Both in qualitative and in quantitative research, collectively developing research instruments and member and expert validations (Seale 1999, 41-158) are standard techniques of *evaluating and approving methods*.
- I have personally found that it is even more effective *conducting a project together* because it forces you to collaborate over a longer period of time in everyday research practice. This allows you to learn about different ways of doing science, working styles, and even different ways of thinking. I also like editing books and special issues very much because I have found that when editing books and special issues, one can do some agenda setting and invite colleagues for writing on issues that I find interesting while bringing in their perspectives.
- For me, the highest form of collaboration is *writing together* because it forces you to actually agree on a specific interpretation when writing

something up. The specific wording of research outputs is where the real differences come out. I remember that I wanted to write “just one” paper with one of my colleagues and friends I had known for years, and we both thought we agreed on the key issues of our discipline. However, before we even wrote the first sentence, we ended up having a fundamental debate about whether knowledge or social practices, norms or actions were the basic unit of social science analysis. This did not really speed up the writing process but was highly productive because it made us reflect on our a priori assumptions and we were forced to integrate concepts that were important to the respective other. In my experience, these types of conflict and collaboration work best, if the scholars collaborating do not only share a common substantial interest but also mutually respect, trust, and like each other. In addition, their working styles have to be at least partially compatible.

Now, with whom do I collaborate and to what aim?

1. *Social Science Methodologists*: Within social science methodology, and especially within quantitative research, there is a large international and interdisciplinary network of methodologists discussing the advantages and disadvantages of specific methods and methodologies, checking each other and identifying the mutual blind spots in order to improve social science research, either by defining general guidelines or at least knowing that guidelines are not possible.
2. *Social Theorists*: Collaborations with social theorists help me find out my blind spots and become more precise on issues I tend to gloss over.
3. *Interdisciplinarity*: Collaborating with researchers from other disciplines is a methodological opportunity to learn about new types of methods. More importantly, different disciplines define the difference between “science” and “non-science” differently and handle positionality differently. For example, engineers, urban planners, and other applied sciences tend to favour practice, which means that they are much less detached than sociology is. This in turn forces me to reflect upon the fine details on how I myself handle positionality and why I do so. On a substantial level, interdisciplinary collaboration increases substantial knowledge on specific fields. As an economic sociologist collaborating with researchers at a Technical University, this means gaining knowledge on fields like water, food, cities, and so on. Collaborating with applied sciences, especially in engineering and urban planning, helps in addressing sociology’s weak spots, such as theorizing the physical materiality of objectifications (Knoblauch 2017, 155-70), as Hering’s (2021) analysis of the role of goods, shops, and urban structure for upholding interaction on commodity chains reveals.
4. *Scholars from other countries* might have very different perspectives on social reality, but also very different ways of drawing the lines between

science and non-science. So far, most of my collaborations are colleagues from the UK, the United States, or France. However, in recent years, I have been purposefully trying to increase collaboration with scholars from other “Non-Western” countries, especially from the Global South – I will come back to this point below on how this has changed my positionality.

5. *Scholars from different career stages*: For me, advanced scholars are fountains of knowledge who often help asking better questions and pointing to older debates or bodies of literature that have been almost forgotten and cannot be easily found in search engines. Teaching students and working with younger scholars does help me because they are good intellectual sparring partners, as they are much less socialised in the discipline and therefore in a way, are still more open-minded to general knowledge. Therefore, they often ask the critical questions, looking at issues with fresh eyes.

5. Where to go Next – Some Blind Spots and Unresolved Issues When Handling Positionality

The techniques discussed above are not new or my own ideas, but ways of handling positionality that were developed by German-language sociology and are engrained in its epistemic culture. While they are helpful in many ways, they do not suffice to decolonize social science methodology, as there are some issues they cannot resolve, and some methodological blind spots remain. I will conclude this paper with pointing out some issues I believe methodological research should address in future research in order to truly decolonize social science methodology, amongst them decolonizing ethnography, overcoming power structures in the global system of science, reintegrating theory and methods, and handling language.

5.1 Decolonizing Ethnography

As I have stated, I use a lot of ethnographic traveling as a technique for theoretical sensitizing. However, ethnographic traveling has some limits:

1. *Language*: When going somewhere and observing, one can observe patterns of interaction. However, unless one fluently speaks the language, one will never truly “*verstehen*” (understand) why people are doing what they are doing. This is especially true for non-European societies in which the original languages are still dominating, like in Southeast Asia and East Asia. Even in most countries, where a European language is the official but not the original language – such as India and many African and Latin American countries – to my

experience, the lower a person's social class is and the more remotely a community is situated, the less likely it is that anyone can speak a European language. This also makes field access more difficult, unless one is happy to restrict one's research to the world view of young male upper-class residents in the global cities. In addition, language is part of the culture. So even if people can speak, e.g., English, this changes what they can and will express in which way – they might tell a completely different story than they might tell in their native tongue (Fuchs-Heinritz 2009 [1984]; Rosenthal 2019 [2014]). Therefore, in order to really conduct social research, one will always have to collect and analyse data in the native tongue(s), which is one of the reasons why in the nineteenth century it was common practice for scholars to know several languages (see section 3.2). I am personally too limited to learn enough languages on the level that would be sufficient for actually doing good field research in enough contexts.

2. *Social Position*: Whether I like it or not, wherever I go, I am a “Western” white middle-class woman (see section 3.1). My social position reflects in my habitus, which can be at least somewhat adapted. For example, I can change my style of clothing and at least partly adapt my body language. However, there is an aspect of my positionality that is hard to talk about for Germans as a result of National Socialism but which is still important for research and the kind of results we produce. Also, part of who we are is engrained in our bodies. For example, you can see from my body structure that I have never really suffered hunger or any serious disease. What to me as a German is much more painful is that my body is also racialized. As I have straight brown hair and am rather small by German standards, I can partly influence appearance, for example, by tanning or wearing glasses, meaning that at least at first glance in, let us say, Cuba or some parts of Asia, I could be a descendent of a local emigrant. But there is no way I might be taken for anything other than white in Africa, Indonesia, or Mexico. While in my own world perspective, this should not and does not matter. However, for the field it does matter, and the differences in physical appearances allow the field to ascribe social value to me more easily. In other words, the same mechanisms that reproduce social inequality in social reality also affect the way we do methods; wherever I go, people in the field are not interacting with a “scholar” but with a “Western” white middle-class woman. This is not necessarily always a disadvantage: People might actually interact with me exactly because I am alien, simply because they are nosy. However, I am well aware that I will never

be able to observe a typical everyday interaction of locals in most countries of the Global South.

3. *Possible Dangers*: Ethnographic traveling is also limited by possible dangers, such as diseases, violence, war, and discrimination against women. There are many fields of social life that can be analysed, but especially those areas of social life that are precarious and those of most interest to sociology – such as an Indian slum or a South-African township – are often exactly the ones where these physical dangers might be most prevalent.

These are the limits to ethnographic traveling I have identified so far – there might be more. Regardless, the question is how to handle them methodologically. One option that is widely practiced is triangulating (Seale 1999, 51-72) outsider and insider perspectives (Fetterman 1988) by conducting research together with a *co-researcher from the local context*. For example, in 2019, I conducted ethnographic walks together with my Indian colleague Gaurav Raheja as well as a group of Ph.D. students from architecture, planning, and the social sciences at IIT Roorkee. While this helped in increasing interpretative precision and erasing some blind spots, from a methodological point of view, this collaboration also contained its own type of difficulties. Namely, similar to scholars from the Global North being blind for some aspects in their own societies, co-researchers from the Global South, too, might be blind for some aspects of their own culture. In addition, the co-researchers themselves also have a social position within their own countries. Namely, while in Europe, most sociologists are from the middle class (and sometimes even the working class), in my experience, most colleagues from the Global South originate from the local upper classes, and when jointly doing ethnography, the field will react to them, too.

Regardless, I find ethnography a very, very fruitful and powerful tool. However, there is one major drawback in the way it has been used in social science research practice that definitively creates blind spots: it is almost always scholars from the Global North doing ethnography in the Global South, never the other way round. One of the solutions we are currently experimenting with and which seems to be extremely efficient as a countermeasure against blind spots created by positionality and in decolonizing the social sciences is *cultural back-reading*. In other words, instead of scholars from the Global North investigating the Global South, scholars from the Global South do research in the Global North. We have put this idea first into practice in the context of the Collaborative Research Centre “The Refiguration of Spaces.” In the summer of 2019, we hosted six scholars from different world regions (Latin America, Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and East Asia). Together, we conducted city walks in Berlin and other cities in East Germany in order to analyse how people interact with architecture. This was even more efficient than expected. The colleagues kept asking exactly the kind of

questions about my country I would ask in other countries, revealing some peculiar German social practices that are so self-evident and engrained in everyday life that I would never have thought about them. This also gave us more insights into possible fallacies of cross-cultural comparison (Baur, Menell, and Million 2021). Just to give an example, one of our discussions started with Fraya Frehse's suggestion that São Paulo and Berlin would make good cases for comparison on the basis that to the Brazilian colleague, they seemed rather old, being more than 300 years old. This incited protest from all Germans that Berlin was "a young city," on the basis that in Europe, a really "old" city dates back at least to the Romans and is 2,000 to 3,000 years old. This resulted in a general discussion on how concepts of urbanity are linked to actual buildings and urban design as well as on how much "old" buildings were valued. For example, well-off South Koreans tend to move to a new house about every twenty years, which has the advantage that urban designers can continuously recreate the city but the disadvantage of being very resource-intensive compared to preserving older structures.

Based on these first promising results, we are now taking the concept of cultural back-reading a step further to combine it to a concept of *cultural cross-reading* by systematically combining perspectives from the Global North and the Global South in the context of the newly-founded "Global Center for Spatial Methods of Urban Sustainability" (GCSMUS), which links researchers from 48 institutions and from 47 countries and aims at delinking.

5.2 Power Structures of the Global System of Science

Decolonizing social science methodology (and theory) is not only about actual methods but also needs to aim at breaking existing power structures within the global system of science (sections 1 and 3.2). Research on the global system of science (section 2.2) has shown that during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Germany – namely Berlin – was the centre of the European systems of science. After World War II, this centre shifted to the US Ivy League universities and has remained there ever since (Baur 2016). This in turn means that today, social science discourse is dominated by US (and maybe other Anglo-Saxon) scholars defining key issues relevant to US society, deciding which theories are most relevant in addressing these issues, and also dominating the most prestigious sociology journals. In other words, there is a centre-periphery-structure in the global system of science that mostly reflects the structure of the world system. Basically, the United States and the other Anglo-Saxon countries are at the centre, continental Europe is at the semi-periphery, and the rest of the world is at the periphery. The more peripheral a scholar's position is in the global system of science, the less likely they are to be heard.

As the German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1981) pointed out, such a power structure is detrimental for social science discourse because knowledge production ideally requires a “*herrschaftsfreier Diskurs*” (“discourse without dominion”), meaning that all scholars can exchange ideas and are heard on eye-level. In discourse fields structured by power relations, this will not happen.

It is well known that there are power structures within the global system of science, making it harder for colleagues from the periphery, e.g., to get access to international journals or to be invited as speakers of a conference. When was the last time you heard a keynote speaker at an international conference who was an African scholar based at an African university? My solution to these issues would be moving more conferences to the Global South and letting the local colleagues organize them. This is closely linked to the concepts of delinking and decentring discourses that have been recently suggested by postcolonial researchers. However, this will not suffice because these power structures are not only an issue of *academic respect*.

Instead, scholars from the more central countries have better access to *resources*, such as funding; libraries, electricity, internet, and other academic infrastructure; lower teaching and administrative loads; and more time for research.

Not only are scholars from the Global North provided with better support from their home institutions, but in addition, they need to take fewer *bureaucratic hurdles* that in theory do not have to do anything with science. For example, if a scholar from the USA or Germany goes on a research trip to another country, they basically can travel immediately due to generous visa policies attached to their passports. The situation is very different for scholars from the Global South. For example, in 2020, the GCSMUS was supposed to host 42 doctoral students from the Global South. This should not have been a problem despite Covid-19, as German immigration regulations officially allowed research trips as long as scholars underwent quarantine (which we organized) and provided the necessary documents (which should not have been a problem, as the program is funded by the German government and we provided a long official letter confirming funding and explaining what the program was about). Regardless, every single visitor became a complex case, sent around the Kafkaesque halls of the iron cage of bureaucracy that makes everything complicated that is very easy, if you are a German national. Literally everything – applying for a visa, booking a flight, getting health insurance, opening a bank account, getting a phone, and so on – became a problem at least for some of our prospective visitors. About a third failed to ever make it to Germany, the rest had to spend at least one third of their research time on administrative issues Europeans never face. What makes it even more frustrating is that I could not discern a pattern or obvious causes – it seems to be a mixture of problems untypical for Europe, bad organization and giving

local officials way too much individual power of decision. Although the number of cases is small, I could also not help but notice that those who faced the most difficulties were either Muslim women covering their hair or young black African men, suggesting that there was also an element of racism involved.

This is not a good basis for productively focussing on one's research, and it automatically creates a hierarchy between colleagues from the Global North and the Global South. I also assume, that in the long run, this type of discrimination is also not very helpful for maintaining one's self-confidence. All in all, it makes discourse without dominion almost impossible.

5.3 Reintegrating Theory and Methods

Concerning social science discourse, I believe that it would not only help to decolonize social science methodology but also social science discourse in general if we reintegrated theory and methods for handling positionality. This in turn would not so much mean that scholars from the Global North and the Global South but instead methodologists and theorists would have to change their research practices.

For methodologists, it would be important to remember that methods are means, not ends by themselves. Methods serve research. They are there for answering questions that people pose. Methods are only useful if they help improve research practice. This implies that methodologists will have to make efforts to make their findings more understandable to non-methodologists. It is of no use if one needs to study social science methodology for twenty years in order to be able to understand a methods paper. This might be interesting within methodological debates, but it is not really useful for actual research, which also suggests that it would be helpful if social science methodologists wrote more handbooks as well as overview papers summarizing current findings and making recommendations. This in turn requires academic career paths to change and these types of texts to be valued more in social science discourse.

Theorists and those interested in substantial research need to change their practices, too. For example, as a methodologist in a typical German-language sociology department, I would never dare to go to a colloquium without ever having read any theoretical text. However, I do know many theorists who had basic methodological training in their first year at university and afterwards could never be bothered again to read any methodological text. This does not make sense to me at all because methodology is nothing you can delegate to methodologists. Methods are also not about techniques; they are about handling methodology, perspectivity, and positionality. In order to be able to fully apply these techniques, theorists and substantial researchers, too, need

to read on methods, even if it is boring. This is essential for grounding theoretical arguments empirically.

5.4 Language

Finally, the importance of language as an instrument of power, thought, and of research is often underestimated. Interestingly, this is an issue that linguistics and sociology of language (e.g., Whorf 1963 [1956]; Werlen 2002), qualitative research (Fuchs-Heinritz 2009 [1984]; Rosenthal 2019 [2014]), quantitative research (Rippl and Seipel 2008, 57-77, 94-95; Warner and Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik 2009), and historical research (Koselleck 1979, 2010) have shown independently. I personally am in strong favour of using English as an *academic lingua franca*. Simultaneously, it is disturbing that researchers very often do not reflect upon what it means that in large parts of the global social science discourse, we communicate in English *only*. There is a trade-off, of course: you gain a broader audience if you write in English. However, you lose the positionality engrained into language. The importance of the latter point is often neglected, although there are many ideas that one cannot really express in all languages.

Moreover, in many countries, English itself has become a means of reproducing social inequality, especially in former colonies like India and large parts of Africa: The upper and upper-middle classes are increasingly only learning English and not learning their native tongue anymore, while the lower and working classes are still speaking their local tongue. This basically means, that the ability to speak English reflects a person's social class. This in turn is important for data collection and analysis, which should be always done in the native tongue – if data are collected in English, the lower and working classes are excluded from the sample (section 5.1). Interestingly, quantitative research has some procedures for at least handling translations and language during data collection (Harkness, Villar, and Edwards 2010, Kromrey 2002 [1980], 72-7; 111-47), while qualitative research is still lacking behind concerning these issues.

For actually thinking more about cultural similarities and differences, but also for doing better research, we would have to take the issue of language much more seriously (Baur, Mennell, and Million 2021). This would mean that social scientists would both have to learn English but also find ways of accommodating for different languages, for example, to be able to read and write in at least some.

6. A Long Way to Go

To sum up, there is a long way to go, and there are many open questions I am struggling with concerning issues of positionality. As I have tried to show in this paper, one of the biggest issues is, on a global level, better integrating scholars from the Global South into sociological discourse in order to decolonize social science methodology, which in turn could enable us to better handle positionality. I have also shown that social science methodology has suggested some solutions to handling positionality, namely a reflexive methodology and empirically-grounded epistemology, using social theory, using methods, and collaborating. I have suggested some additional techniques, namely reintegrating theory and methods, overcoming power structures in the global system of science, handling language, and decolonizing ethnography. I am sure that these will not suffice – however, as these are obviously the blind spots caused by my own positionality, it is up to colleagues (especially) from the Global South to identify these blind spots and suggest further countermeasures.

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