Microsociological Perspectives on Identity Formation
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A four-level interaction concept

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In my contribution I would like to introduce a relational interaction concept that draws a medium position in answering the question how to appropriately understand an interaction and the identities of social actors sociologically. Neither a functional nor an actor centred position shall be obtained here.

Namely because of the latter - like for example the symbolic interactionism – "social framings" (Goffman 1974) can only be accounted for insufficiently. Everything that happens while interactions are taking place is described as a process of negotiation. The functional position on the other hand – like Luhmann`s systems theory – makes interactions and actors look like a marginal phenomenon of modern societies. The actually relevant processes are – according to this theory – taking place in abstract communication systems, namely the functional subsystems of society and the organisations. In other words, both approaches blending out the interdependency between interactions and processes, respectively structures of a higher degree of generalization.

In a first step I would like to introduce the conceptual framing in it`s main features. Afterwards I am going to illustrate it's application in a case study. It introduces results of a research of communication processes and of the communication culture in a sales department of an automobile company. A particular focus is aimed at the abilities of connection of the quantitative network analysis with qualitative methods of collecting relational data. The conclusions will be outlined in a resume.

1. The four-level interaction concept

According to sociological definitions an interaction is understood as an «interrelation between actions», inasmuch as ego, under the condition of the co-presence of alter, orientates its interactive contribution towards the expectations of alter and to the appraisal of the situation in common (cp. Hillmann 1994: 381-382). Viewed in such a way, the sociological conceptualization of interaction always proceeds relationally and processually. In general, the interaction concept which is to be discussed here follows this relational perspective. It particularly aims at combining individual actors' views with the results of the change towards

the level of interaction. The latter has its own dynamics and structural pattern. To fulfil this intention, four levels need to be distinguished analytically: the level of the interaction context (a), the level of the interaction network (b), the level of the interventions (c) and the level of the expressions of emotions (d). These levels are connected to each other in a variety of ways. This connection will be dealt with in the context of explaining the level of the interaction network. They are supposed to make the analysis of social interaction in its multi-dimensionality possible. The operationalisation of this concept then provides four accordant levels of investigation.

(a) Level of the interaction context:

Every interaction happens within a context and is only open to interpretation through this context. However, this context has to be estimated much broader than what Goffman means with framing. Also subtle perspective preliminary decisions belong to the interaction context, which can't be found out through a situation analysis accurately as possible; they can only be understood in reference to organisational or even societal determining factors. To the latter, those perspectives, possibilities of interpretation and ways of differentiation are counted among those who are established in a society at a certain time.

Analytically, two types of imprinting factors can be distinguished: The first type contains terms according to the specific context, which have to assume for the accomplishment of a certain interaction. Among these are, for example, for every certain interaction fitted role pattern, instruments of power and specific behavioural rituals. The second type contains determining factors, which affect the interaction significantly from the outside, for example legal, moral and normative standards towards individual actors. To identify this heterogeneous context sizes, Niklas Luhmann`s concept of semantics is accessed: Based on a relatively fixed temporal, factual and social context his concept describes the entirety of the forms of knowledge. The semantic context of an interaction contains thus also cultural symbols, terms, common language and urban jargon, norms as well as the set of already established roles (Luhmann 1980).

(b) Level of the interaction network:

The level of interaction can be differentiated analytically in two ways: firstly, in terms of its dynamical aspects, and secondly in terms of its structural dimensions. As Harrison C. White (1992) argued every actor is assigned his network position or respectively identity through network dynamics and network constellations. Therefore actors take up network specific

positions, which are basically designed socially and especially semantically. Social relations and their definition are accordingly contingent through a net of other relations. That means on the other hand: the network constellation and focal processes form singular interactions as well as the self- and external perception of the actors substantially. During the focal processes path dependency and interaction dynamics can establish themselves because of the relational constellations, which give the interactions a direction which can hardly be influenced by individual actors. Thereby the interactions are gladded in the course of time by perceptions and conditions in such a way that a once adopted path can only be left with an enormous effort. The established power structure, patterns of coalition and cooperation, powerful (formal and informal) information channels, but also existing barriers and contentions are examples for network constellations. The formation of partial groups, the intensification of contacts, positional shake-ups, and newly added positions can be assigned to the concept of network dynamics just as the cutback of actor positions.

(c) Level of the interventions:

With this four level concept I will undertake a selective differentiation between interactions and interventions. Interventions result from micropolitical calculations of individual actors. They are therefore an expression of the effort, to play a part in the ongoing interaction sequence with an own contribution. If one asks for the impulse for such interventions, one is referred to motives, needs and goals of the particular actor.

Insofar, it is not about a mere allocation of a specific network identity or respectively a network position. Rather, the positions of the actors are adopted individually and motivational charged. The motives can consist in this sense of the consolidation of one's own position within the relational arrangement towards other actors, of the accumulation of instruments of power, of the conduction of active networking or the aim at a change of position. The actor starts with his positioning actively, to sound out himself and his environment, and therein to pace off the horizon of possibilities of interventions.

(d) Level of the expressions of emotions:

As a special form of intervention, expressions of emotions as the fourth level are discussed. They in the first place make a binding social relation (like a relation between friends) out of a tie of dependency. They express personal relations and relevance patterns of individual actors. At this level affiliation to groups and contexts, comments on ongoing processes or

respectively on a certain incident, outflagging own contributions but also affective statements can be differentiated.

For the observer expressions of emotions are always a demonstration of „closeness" or respectively „distance" regarding social relations. Relations which are built on this foundation - like for example a friendship - can be interpreted as "stories" (White 1992), which are created by the participating actor for themselves and for each other. The so-called emotional network card after Kahn and Antonucci (1980) is qualified for the analysis of these stories.

These four levels are locked together in many ways: Nonverbal expressions of emotions for example have to revert to semantics, with which one can express joy, approval or other forms of emotion. In this four level concept, the network level takes up a key position. At this level, micropolitical interventions in their effects on the interaction genesis can be observed as well as transformation and adoption of the semantic specifications.

2. The case-study: Concerning processes of change within a company

The researched sales department of an automobile company consists of fifty employees, who are divided in five teams. Every team has a team leader; the whole department is guided by a department manager. A particular challenge consisted in the fact that the department evolved from an organisational merging (also spacious) of two separate operating departments. The communication processes and communication structures of the department were analysed after the merging over five years via observation, analysis of documents, interviews and questionnaire. The declared goal of the department manager was to make a community of practice out of the department, in which knowledge could be shared barrier-free and problems could be solved. This aim can be conceptualised as a semantic specification.

Instead of realizing these goals, social closing processes within each team could be made out, which attracted attention to itself especially through a demonstratively ostentatious team spirit and through an insistence on an own team culture. Even a job rotation could not change this situation. Persons who changed their team put down the perspective of their original team after a very short period of time and acquired the one of the new team. Partly, even the prevailing stereotypes about the original team were adopted.

This object of investigation concerns a distinctive and therefore particularly instructive case of collision of ambitious organisational challenges (level (a) of the interaction context) with the levels of interventions (level (c) and level (d)). The venue itself is the level of the

interaction network (level (b)): At this level the interventions come to light, here the intended change management actions (new structures, new forms of cooperation) develop their complete imprinting power. Also the identities of single actors or the identities of whole teams were a product of the network constellations.

3. Conclusion

Through these results a necessity is additionally underlined, that a precise interaction constellation has to be examined from several dimensions. If only a subjective perspective of the employees or a semantic analysis would have been applied in this case study, the gap between the (statist) pretensions and attitudes of the employees couldn't have been made visible. The same estimation also applies inevitably to the methodical coverage. Here as well, the question whether one has to decide in favour of qualitative or quantitative methods when conducting interaction analyzes is downright misleading. With the quantitative network analyses a topographical sight onto the network shall be obtained. The use of the qualitative network analysis focuses on a subjective view of the department, of the team and of the own position of the individually interviewed actor. Exactly this view becomes action-guiding regarding its interventions. Narrations and actions stabilize each other in the process, whereas the cooperation is laid or respectively charged through the articulation of emotions (level (d)).

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