

# European Perspectives on the Future of Qualitative Research

## Report on the International Conference »Innovating Qualitative Research: Challenges and Opportunities« at the University of Bayreuth

On 20-21 September 2010 the midterm conference of the Research Network Qualitative Methods of the European Sociological Association (ESA) took place in Bayreuth. Organized by the Chair of Sociology of Culture and Religion of the University of Bayreuth (*Bernt Schnettler*), the event had a notably international attendance. For two days intense discussion raged between more than 90 scientists from Germany and many other European countries as well as the USA, Latin America and Africa on questions concerning the future of Qualitative Social Research.

The conference was made possible by a broad cooperation between various scientific associations and the financial sponsorship, among others, of the European Sociological Association, the Research Network Migration and Knowledge (*Forschungsverbund Migration und Wissen*, ForMig), the University of Bayreuth and the University Association, the Bavarian Ministry for Education, Science and Culture (*Bayerisches Ministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur*, BMWK) as well as the German and Swiss Society for Sociology (*Deutsche and Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Soziologie*, DGS and SGS) and the active participation of the DGS-sections Sociology of Knowledge, Science and Technology Studies and Qualitative Methods.



f.l.t.r.: Silverman, Eberle, Knoblauch, Cisneros, Macamo, Valles

The leading question of this conference on future perspectives for Qualitative Social Research in Europe was discussed at the start and the end of the conference in two plenary sessions. In these, the participants addressed the Challenges and Chances of Qualitative Research in an increasingly interconnected social and research network in Europe. Conference highlights included the keynote speech by David Silverman, a British sociologist (London), and the tribute paid to sociologist Thomas Eberle (St. Gall). Within this framework, numerous contributions on Qualitative Methods were presented from within a broad spectrum of research areas, including religion, new technologies, migration, ethnography, research on Africa, grounded theory, discourse research, urban sociology and community studies, as well as social memory studies.

A considerable number of DGS members got actively involved in the event and made an essential contribution, thus ensuring that the conference was a success: *Ingo Schulz-Schaeffer* (Duis-

burg) and *Cornelius Schubert* (Berlin), for instance, led the sessions on “Qualitative Research on (and with) New Technologies”. Organized in cooperation



*Krzysztof Konecki, Anne Ryen, Ruth Wodack*

with the DGS-section on Science and Technology Studies and the Society for Science and Technology Research (*Gesellschaft für Wissenschafts- und Technikforschung*, GWTF), the session involved a discussion of two main points in qualitative technology research: on the one hand, the participants focused on the role of qualitative methods for research into the development, implementation and application of technology. The speakers presented solutions and new approaches to the pro-

blem of the insufficient transferability of common methods for detecting social meaning in the technological field. The second focal point dealt with empirical research using new technologies, especially with regard to the general availability of digital techniques, e.g. video recording, and the development of analytical approaches to such data.

The session on “Qualitative Research on Contemporary Religion”, organized in cooperation with the ESA Research Network Sociology of Religion and the chair for Religious Studies II, University of Bayreuth, was led by *Bernt Schnettler* and *Steffen Dix* (Lisbon). In this session participants both discussed the specific problems of research within the growing field of religion and presented approaches and techniques designed to tackle these methodological difficulties.



*l.t.r.: Konecki, Silverman, Eberle, Knoblauch, Cisneros, Macamo, Valles*

Together with the Research Network Migration and Knowledge (ForMig) a session on “Qualitative Research and Migration” was organized by *Dariusz Zifonun* (Berlin) and *Friedrich Heckmann* (Bamberg). Here, too, the main focus was on methodological questions. Emphasis was put on qualitative research on knowledge transfer in migrant milieus. Questions of research and analysis were also discussed and working results presented.

Together with *Krzysztof Konecki* (Lodz, Polen), *Jörg Strübing* (Tübingen) moderated the session on “Innovating Grounded Theory”. In relation to the widely known method of empirically based theory construction, which stems back to Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, the participants presented the most recent examples of a living practice. A total of six contributions discussed the recent theoretical developments and their future prospects. Discourse scientist *Reiner Keller* (Landau) presided over the session on “Qualitative Methods in Discourse Research”.



Conference-Dinner

The session focused on different aspects of research such as interpreting collected data, possibilities of triangulation in the tradition of thought stemming from Michel Foucault and in other methods, as well as on other questions concerning the application of qualitative methods to discourse analysis.

*Alejandro Baer* (Madrid/Bayreuth) chaired the session on “Qualitative Methods and Social Memory Research”. The discussions in the group centred on several topics, including field research into commemoration ceremonies in local, national and global contexts, the examination of memorials, museums and monuments and the intersection of personal experience reports and public-commemorative discourse. In

this context, the participants also discussed the use value of new visual ethnographic methods of survey and analysis.

The session on “Qualitative Inquiry in Urban and Community Research” was moderated by *Margarethe Kusenbach* (Tampa, USA). Presentations in this session focused on the influence of qualitative surveys on the understanding of urban interactions, institutions and structures, the role of human-shaped environments in the lives of individuals and groups, the influence of location and space on identities, bodies and emotions and so on.

The sociologist *Dieter Neubert* and his ethnologist colleague, *Kurt Beck* (both Bayreuth), organized the session on “Qualitative Research in and on Africa”. In cooperation with the Bayreuth Institute for African Studies and its graduate programme (BIGSAS) their session inquired into the specific challenges that field research in and on Africa has to meet and to what extent this work can contribute methodically to the development of qualitative research in general.

In addition to the sessions led by DSG-members, another thematic session was devoted to developments in qualitative research. Chaired by *Katharina Jacobsson* (Lund, Sweden), the session on “Ethnography and the Study of Situations” focused on the participants’ ethnographic and situational research projects and their results. As before, the methods used were discussed critically.

In addition to the thematic sessions, the conference agenda contained many other items of interest. To begin the conference, a joint introduction was made by *Bernt Schnettler* together



*Bernt Schnettler*

with the president of the ESA Research Networks Qualitative

Methods *Krzysztof Konecki*. *Konecki* also moderated the ensuing discussion on the conference's key question, namely the future of qualitative research in Europe, which was led by an international plenary comprising eight renowned scientists. Together, and in interaction with the audience, *César Cisneros* (Mexico City), *Elísio Macamo* (Basle), *Hubert Knoblauch* (Berlin), *Miguel Valles* (Madrid) *David Silverman* (London) and *Thomas Eberle* (St. Gall) led an animated exchange of ideas. They debated questions such as: what is the social relevance of this kind of research and what contribution does it make to possible solutions? How can qualitative methods be strengthened in Europe without stepping into the trap of standardization and mainstreaming? And in what way can we work against the marginalization of other qualitative traditions (e.g. from Spain and Latin America) in an Anglo-centric academic world? After the morning's plenary session and the afternoon's thematic sessions, *David Silverman* introduced the third section of talks on the first day with a programmatic speech titled "Reclaiming 'Experience': What We Can Learn from the Career of the Concept". In his speech, he claimed, going against the grain of current opinion, that spoken language is a "mirror" to the subject's motivations. The problem, he continued, is that dimensions of observable behaviour are being generally neglected. In his conclusion, *Silverman* advocated discarding the outdated "romantic mirror view" for new improved methods of data-collection and analysis with which it is possible



*Thomas Eberle, Krzysztof Konecki*

to achieve better results, e.g. concerning research on experience.

The last official item on the agenda of the first conference day was reserved for the tribute to sociologist *Thomas Eberle*. The three laudators *Giampietro Go-*

*bo* (Milan), *Christoph Meader* (St. Gall) and *Hubert Knoblauch* praised the former president of the Swiss Society for Sociology and current ESA vice-president for his extraordinary achievements in the field of qualitative research.

The following day was characterized by further presentations and debates on topics to do with Qualitative Social Research. Following the thematic sessions, a second plenary was held in the afternoon that focused on “The Future of Qualitative Research in Europe”. Chaired by *Bernt Schnettler*, the session comprised scholars including *Jan Coetzee* (Rhodes, South Africa), *Giampietro Gobo*, *Krzysztof Konecki*, *Anne Ryen* (Agder, Norway), *Jörg Strübing* and *Ruth Wodak* (Vienna), while *Katja Mruck* (Berlin) and *Günter Mey* (Stendal) attended via video message and introduced their online-journal project called “Forum Qualitative Social Research” (FQS). Among other questions, the participants discussed issues concerning the autonomy of qualitative methods and their inevitable complementarity, quantitative procedures and the need to engage more in order to make the results of qualitative research better known in sociological theory. The discussants also mentioned that the ESA-network might possibly gain from the participation of a scientist from one of the previously unrepresented eastern European states. They also commented on the possibility of involving neighbour disciplines of sociology in order not only to strengthen interdisciplinary research, but also to further innovations and the interdisciplinarity of qualitative methods. This second plenary was the final item on the agenda of an event that succeeded in pointing up the potential of and challenges involved in qualitative research for the years to come.

Bernd Rebstein