

COMBINING METHODS - LACK OF METHODOLOGY: DISCUSSION OF SOTIRAKOPOULOU & BREAKWELL

Uwe Flick

Technische Universität Berlin

In their paper, Sotirakopoulou & Breakwell propose "employing multi-methodological approaches" in the study of social representations. They give reasons for this proposal that are based on the multifoldness of the construct of social representations, on the complexity of the phenomenon of social representations, and on the different questions that can be pursued (and of cause shall be answered) by studying social representations. Practically, they start with Moscovici's definition of social representations given in the foreword to Herzlich's study (1973) and "break down" the construct in its components (system of values, ideas and practices etc.). For each of these components, the authors suggest to employ different methods (questionnaires, interviews, check-lists, content analyses of press) and finally to use synthetic procedures to compare the results obtained by each method and to bring the picture together.

The idea of employing different methods in studying social representations here is theoretically founded in the phenomenon to be studied. This idea opens wider perspectives in approaching the complexity of social representations, but it is not as new as the authors suggest in their paper and, in the way they propose, it lacks *methodological* foundation. These two critical remarks and some reflections on how to overcome these short-comings of the authors' propositions will be the subject of what follows. If we have a look on the methodological discussion beyond the discussions around social representations, we can see that the idea of Sotirakopoulou & Breakwell has been dicussed more generally under the headline of "triangulation" for quite a while (see Flick 1991, 1992a,b). This general discussion shall be outlined¹ briefly to relate it to the propositions of Sotirakopoulou & Breakwell.

1. THE IDEA OF TRIANGULATION - SOURCES AND HISTORY

Nonreactive Measurement: Multitrait-Multimethod-Matrix

The history of this idea can be followed back about thirty years and into other contexts of research. Originally it was taken as a metaphor "from navigation and military strategy that use multiple reference points to locate an object's exact position" (Smith, 1975, p. 273). As a methodical principle in social research this idea was developed in the discussion about nonreactive measurement (cf. Webb et al., 1966) to find out, "if a hypothesis can survive the confrontation with a series of complementary methods of testing" (Campbell & Fiske, 1959, p. 82). Already in this context the initiating questions were, if and how subjects under study are more or less constituted by the methods employed for their examination, too. But here we find rather the negative version of conceiving this fact - that the subject under study might

¹ Here I am integrating some reflections from another paper (Flick 1992b).

suffer a bias from the employed methods, that the results might be artifacts. The methodological strategy to handle this problem was to combine different methods of measurement in the "multitrait-multimethod-matrix". Here, strategies of triangulation are conceived and employed as strategies to validate empirical procedures and/or results and not so much as an additional epistemological source.

Multiple Triangulation in Qualitative Research - Basic Theoretical Concepts

Denzin² (1970/1978) introduced the idea of triangulation into the discussion of qualitative research as "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon" (1978, p. 291). By this definition Denzin also still conceives triangulation as a strategy of validation. He distinguishes different types of triangulation. On one hand in "data-triangulation" the combination of different datasources that are examined at different times, places and persons is proposed. Denzin thinks that this strategy is comparable with theoretical sampling by Glaser & Strauss (1967). As a second type Denzin suggests "investigator triangulation", which means the employment of different observers or interviewers to control or correct the subjective bias from the individual. "Theory triangulation" means "approaching data with multiple perspectives and hypotheses in mind (..). Various theoretical points of view could be placed side by side to assess their utility and power" (1978, p. 297). Central concept finally is "methodological triangulation", either "within-method" - for example using different subscales in a questionnaire - or "between-methods". Denzin further suggests three principles of methodological triangulation: "First, the nature of the research problem and its relevance to a particular method should be assessed (..). Second, it must also be remembered that each method has inherent strengths and weaknesses (..) Third, methods must be selected with an eye to their theoretical relevance" (1978, p. 303).

Finally, at that time, Denzin characterizes the aim of the latter strategy as follows: "To summarize, methodological triangulation involves a complex process of playing each method off against the other so as to maximize the validity of field efforts" (1978, p. 304).

Ethnographic Fieldwork: Reflexive Triangulation

Recently, more attention is paid to triangulation in ethnographic field research. In this context Hammersley & Atkinson (1983, p. 198) argue, that "data-source triangulation involves the comparison of data relating to the same phenomenon but deriving from different phases of fieldwork, different points of respondent validation, the accounts of different participants (including the ethnographer) involved in the setting". Besides of triangulating data-sources, these authors suggest "technique triangulation. Here, data produced by different techniques are compared. To the extent that these techniques involve different kinds of validity threat, they provide a basis for triangulation". Compared to Denzin's conception, one central point is mentioned further by Hammersley & Atkinson: "What is involved in triangulation is not the combination of different kinds of data per se, but rather an attempt to relate different sorts of data in such a way as to counteract various possible threats to the validity of our analysis" (1983, p. 198). Because of mentioning this aspect, the authors call their conception "reflexive triangulation".

² Although Denzin himself (Denzin 1989a) now takes a somehow different position in many points, his earlier propositions still are the basis for most of the recent discussions on triangulation especially in Germany (Spöhring 1989, Lamnek 1988). So, we will first deal with this earlier position of Denzin and the critics related to it and lateron have a look at his reactions to these critics.

Combination of Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

Finally, the combination or "mixing" of qualitative and quantitative research is labelled with this term currently (Jick, 1983, Lamnek, 1988). In this context, a central question is, how to conceive the relation of both types of methods and their results. Thus, triangulation gains further relevance, since "qualitative and quantitative approaches are complementary rather than competitive methods (.. and the) use of a particular method (..) rather must be based on the nature of the actual research problem at hand" (Wilson, 1981, p. 58). In this conception quantitative research is no longer per se dominant and superior to qualitative research and the first is not per se the instance of evaluation for the latter.

2. CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS: FROM VALIDATION TO IN-DEPTH-UNDERSTANDING

Denzin's earlier conception of triangulation is not only the most discussed and quoted one. It also has been objective of most critique on triangulation in general. For example ethnomethodologist David Silverman (1985, p. 21) criticizes Denzin's assumption of a "master reality in terms of which all accounts and actions are to be judged. This casts great doubt on the argument that multiple research methods should be employed in a variety of settings in order to gain a 'total' picture of some phenomenon (..). Putting the picture together is more problematic than such proponents of triangulation would imply. What goes on in one setting is not a simple corrective to what happens elsewhere - each must be understood in its own terms". Here is argued - if we think a little further - that Denzin neglects the basic idea of triangulation, that was the starting point of the discussion in Webb et al. (1966) - the reactiveness of methods or in other words: That every method constitutes the subject under study in a specific way. Not before users of triangulation make allowance for this problem sufficiently, they can ignore the following critique by Fielding & Fielding (1986, p. 33): "Multiple triangulation as Denzin expounded it, is the equivalent for research methods of 'correlation' in data analysis. They both represent extreme forms of eclecticism".

Both critiques point at Denzin's conception of triangulation as a strategy of validation in the classical sense of the meaning, which assumes *one* reality and *one* conception of the subject under study independent of the special methodical approach - in Denzin's words "the same phenomenon". Thus Fielding & Fielding (1986, p. 33) condense their critique of Denzin's conception in the following programmatic argumentation: "Theoretical triangulation does not necessarily reduce bias, nor does methodological triangulation necessarily increase validity. Theories are generally the product of quite different traditions so when they are combined, one might get a fuller picture, but not a more 'objective' one. Similarly different methods have emerged as a product of different theoretical traditions, and therefore combining them can add range and depth, but not accuracy". Central point of these critiques is the technicistic conception of triangulation in Denzin's program. Although he suggests triangulating theoretical perspectives, too, his concept of methodological triangulation as a strategy aiming at validity neglects theoretical differences between methods and the way each of them constitutes the research object. In the idea of playing methods off against each other and in the idea of the same phenomenon, not only the complexity of triangulation in general but also the potentials of this strategy are simplified and artificially reduced.

Using Triangulation as an Alternative to Validation

Through the attempt of gaining validity by way of triangulation on one hand the subject under study is necessarily objectivated. On the other hand the question arises, which result should be preferred, if different methodical approaches lead to contradictive outcomes. Corresponding to these critiques several researchers try to find a way out of the outlined dilemma by discussing triangulation no longer as a strategy of validation but as an alternative to validation. So Fielding & Fielding (1986, p. 33) suggest as a résumé of their critique of Denzin: "In other words, there is a case for triangulation, but not the one Denzin makes. We should combine theories and methods carefully and purposefully with the intention of adding breadth or depth to our analysis but not for the purpose of pursuing 'objective' truth". Also Lamnek (1988, p. 236) pleads for expecting rather complementary than congruent results by triangulating different methods. Finally, these conceptual aims are summarized by Köckeis-Stangl (1982, p. 363) as follows: "Instead of talking about validations, perhaps it would be more adequate to see our control-processes as more-perspective triangulation (...) and in advance to be prepared for receiving as a result no uniform picture but rather one of a kaleidoscopic kind".

Denzin's Reaction to his Critics and his Current Position

As already mentioned, Denzin's current position has changed. In the third edition of his manual (1989a) he is taking a more consequent interpretive position (see also Denzin 1989b, 1988) towards research and especially towards the status and use of methods. This revision also affects his position towards triangulation. Here (1989a, p. 234sq.), he reacts directly to the critical comments of Silverman (1985) and Fielding & Fielding (1986) we already discussed. He also abandons the idea of validity as a main purpose for the use of triangulation, which he now characterizes as follows (1989a, p. 236): "Triangulation, or the use of multiple methods, is a plan of action that will raise sociologists above the personal biases that stem from single methodologies" and: "...triangulation of method, investigator, theory, and data remains the soundest strategy of theory construction". So, Denzin keeps the types of triangulation he proposed earlier and we discussed above, even though he now stresses more or less different points in their definitions and descriptions. For instance, he holds that "between-method triangulation can take many forms, but its basic feature will be the combination of two or more different research strategies in the study of the same *empirical units*" (1989a, p. 244, my italics). The shift in the purpose of using triangulation is shown by Denzin as follows: "...the concept of hypothesis testing must be abandoned. The interactionist seeks to build interpretations, not test hypotheses" (1989a, p. 244). With regards to the critique by Fielding & Fielding (1986), Denzin now sees multiple triangulation as follows: "The goal of multiple triangulation is a fully grounded interpretive research approach. Objective reality will never be captured. In-depth understanding, not validity, is sought in any interpretive study. Multiple triangulation should never be eclectic. It cannot, however, be meaningfully compared to correlation analysis in statistical studies" (Denzin 1989a, p. 246).

3. NEW QUESTIONS IN THE STUDY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

So, Authors as Fielding & Fielding or Köckeis-Stangl, and recently also Denzin, see the relevance of triangulation not as a strategy of validating results obtained by employing

qualitative methods but as an alternative to this and as a "method-appropriate" strategy of founding their credibility (Flick 1987) and of enlarging epistemological perspectives and results obtained.

If we now return to the suggestions of Sotirakopoulou & Breakwell, we see that this is also the direction of their argumentation, when they want to get hold of the complexity of social representations by breaking down the construct and employing different methods in studying each of its parts. When we earlier argued, that the authors pursue their idea with some lack of methodological foundation, we have to make this point a little more explicit now. As a first question arises how to establish relations between the different sorts of data and results that are gathered with the variety of methods. This question arises especially for the case when we get conflicting or contradictory results by different methods. Here the authors propose to "investigate further in order to explain such a conflict", but without giving concrete examples or strategies. A second question is, how different the methods used by the authors in their study really are: Questionnaires, interviews and attribute check-lists are operating more or less on the same track, even if the levels are different: All these methods produce verbal or written reports of subjective standpoints (knowledge, feelings, images). Analyses of the press give access to the social context and background of such standpoints and so offer a different type of data, but still resting on the level of knowledge. But, the potential of triangulating different methodical approaches lies in combining different perspectives of research and in focussing on aspects of the subject under study which are as different as possible. Triangulation will be most fruitful if the selection of triangulated perspectives and methods is substantiated: "What is important is to choose at least one method which is specifically suited to exploring the *structural aspects* of the problem and at least one which can capture the essential elements of its *meaning to those involved*" (Fielding & Fielding 1986, p. 34, my italics). So, we have to ask how to proceed in order to gain a really many-sided kaleidoscope and a picture of the subject under study, that is really including different perspectives. This goal can be reached, when we combine perspectives and methods aiming for two central and different aspects of social representations: (subjective and social) knowledge they consist of and activities through which they are produced, circulated and applied. This sort of combining methods and data that are relevant on really different conceptual levels of the phenomenon under study can be found in Jodelet's (1989) study of social representations of mental illness and in our own study (Flick 1989) on trust in helping relationships. In the first study, *contents* of social representations were investigated with interviews and analyses of documents and their *social effects and functions in social activities* were studied with participant observations. In our study we employed interviews to reconstruct counselors' subjective theories (as a type of everyday knowledge) on "trust between counselor and client" and used conversation analyses of counseling discourses done by the same counselors to look how this sort of knowledge is employed in concrete professional actions in real social situations. Here we combined methods aiming for subjective knowledge and for social interactions and found differences among social groups (psychologists, social workers, physicians) in the way of conceiving and handling the phenomenon of trust under specific institutional conditions.

So, finally, I want to share the hopes of Sotirakopoulou & Breakwell, that there will be more studies with similar multi-methodological approaches in the field of social representations. But I am also hoping, that there will start a discussion on the methodological problems and perspectives of taking such an approach to social representations.

REFERENCES

- Denzin, N. (1978). *The Research Act*. Chicago: Aldine (originally 1970).
- Denzin, N. (1988). *Interpretive Biography*. London: Sage.
- Denzin, N. (1989a). *The Research Act*. (3rd. edition) Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall
- Denzin, N. (1989b). *Interpretive interactionism*. London: Sage.
- Fielding, N. G. and Fielding, J.L. (1986). *Linking Data*. Beverley Hills: Sage.
- Flick, U. (1987). Methodenangemessene Gütekriterien in der qualitativ- interpretativen Forschung. In Bergold, J. B. and Flick, U., (eds.), *Einsichten - Zugänge zur Sicht des Subjekts mittels qualitativer Forschung*. Tübingen: DGVT-Verlag, pp. 246-263.
- Flick, U. (1989). *Vertrauen, Verwalten, Einweisen - Subjektive Vertrauenstheorien in sozialpsychiatrischer Beratung*. Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitätsverlag.
- Flick, U. (1992a). *Entzauberung der Intuition - Systematische Perspektiven-Triangulation als Strategie der Geltungsbegründung qualitativer Daten und Interpretationen*. In Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, J. (ed.), *Analyse qualitativer Daten*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag (in press).
- Flick, U. (1992b). *Triangulation Revisited: Strategy of Validation or Alternative?* In Press.
- Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (1983). *Ethnography - Principles in practice*. London: Tavistock.
- Herzlich, C. (1973) *Health and Illness*. London: Academic Press
- Jick, T. (1983). *Mixing Qualitative and Quantitative Methods: Triangulation in Action*: In Maanen, J. v. (ed.), *Qualitative Methodology*. London: Sage: pp. 135-148.
- Jodelet, D. (1989). *Folies et Représentations sociales*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Köckeis-Stangl, E. (1982). *Methoden der Sozialisationsforschung*. In Hurrelmann, K. and Ulich, D. (eds.) *Handbuch der Sozialisationsforschung*. Weinheim, Beltz.
- Lamnek, S. (1988). *Qualitative Sozialforschung, Vol. I*. München: Psychologie Verlags Union.
- Moscovici, s. (1973). *Foreword* In Herzlich, C., *Health and Illness*. London: Academic Press
- Silverman, D. (1985). *Qualitative Methodology and Sociology*. Aldershot: Gower.
- Smith, H. W., (1975). *Strategies for Social Research*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Spöhring, W. (1989). *Qualitative Sozialforschung*. Stuttgart: Teubner.
- Webb, E., Campbell, D., Schwartz, R., Sechrest, L. (1966). *Unobtrusive Measures: Nonreactive Research in the Social Sciences*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Wilson, T., *Qualitative "versus" Quantitative Methods in Social Research* (1981). In Küchler, M. et al. (eds.), *Integration von qualitativen und quantitativen Forschungsansätzen*. Mannheim: ZUMA.

Uwe Flick
 Inst. f. Psychologie
 Technische Universität
 Sekr. DO 303
 Dovesstr. 1-5
 1000 Berlin 10
 Germany