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Linking British Cultural Studies and German Critical Psychology in qualitative research

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Abstract
Theoretical conceptions and methodical approaches developed by British Cultural Studies and German Critical Psychology are, above all, interested in the relations between social conditions and subjects. Both pay special attention to (societal and discursive) contexts and meanings of social phenomena. Both regard power as an important aspect, that influences social relations and the conditions in which subjects assume social positions, assign meaning, and act. Furthermore, in both approaches the aspiration to critically intervene is emphasized. But even though these and other similarities exist, there are also a number of differences – for example in the understanding of what 'power' or 'intervention' actually is – as British Cultural Studies and Critical Psychology refer to distinct theory traditions. In this article, I argue that, despite these differences, both approaches can be fruitfully linked for a wider analytical perspective in qualitative research, which draws attention especially to power relations, societal imbalances, and the actions of subjects in restrictive contexts.

Keywords
Critical Psychology, British Cultural Studies, qualitative research, social inequality

1. Introduction

Researchers who aim to conduct critical research within the subject area of difference, power, and social inequalities face diverse challenges. They require theoretical and methodological approaches that allow them, for example, to reflect on power relations within the research process itself and on their own potential reproduction thereof over the course of their actions. Moreover, the

approaches should facilitate research procedures that organize knowledge production in a way that allows results to be used to critically address and intervene in societal imbalances.

Researchers seeking to address social inequalities and institutionalized power relations and to determine how the subject's agency is influenced by these conditions require approaches that allow them not just to analyze and describe social contexts, but also to focus on the involved subjects as agents. This is important in order to emphasize that power relations and social imbalances are not naturally given and determining factors, but socially constructed. And that subjects are never just 'victims' of these conditions – nor privileged by them –, but are always endowed with agency and an active part of the production of the conditions under which they live. Furthermore, it is the subjects' experiences and their ways of acting that point to the state of the social contexts, power relations, and social imbalances in which they live and assign meaning. After all, these perspectives are important for scrutinizing researchers' own constructions with regard to reproducing power-related effects. That is why research in the subject area of difference and inequalities requires theoretical and methodological approaches that are able to reconstruct relations between subjects and social contexts or societal conditions without losing sight of the involved subject.

In this paper, I argue that useful approaches, in extension of general principals of qualitative social research, can be found in the premises of British Cultural Studies, and particularly in the concept of articulation as introduced by Stuart Hall (1986), and in the research perspective of German Critical Psychology as developed by Klaus Holzkamp (1983). Both concepts are characterized by different theoretical and methodological approaches and offer insightful complementary perspectives for researchers concerned with power, difference, inequality, or discrimination.

I will elaborate on this point by introducing the distinct perspectives of the two concepts with regard to four aspects that are, in my view, crucial for any research endeavor that aims to take power asymmetries into account. Both approaches allow, albeit in different ways, for

- interrelating subjects, experiences/interpretations, social contexts, and societal relations.
- analyzing social contexts in a subject-oriented way as frameworks that extend or limit the subject's possibilities of experience, interpretation, and action, while paying special attention to the subject's agency.
- conducting research with the aspiration to critically address and intervene in social relations of inequality.

- taking into account the dilemma that research on social differences, power, and inequality is itself embedded and involved in many ways with (certain) relations of difference, power, and inequalities.

After a discussion of both approaches, I will point out some implications for qualitative research in the field of social inequalities.

2. Cultural Studies and Critical Psychology

The analysis of the relationship between individual and society is of central concern to Cultural Studies as well as Critical Psychology. Both approaches theorize these connections as mediated through powerful and dynamic social constructions of meaning in which experiences are made, interpreted, and communicated. Thus, experiences, interpretations, and actions of individuals are always viewed as intertwined with social power relations and specific social contexts. In this respect, both theoretical concepts assume that everyday actions and interpretations always point beyond the subject to configurations of social power relations. According to both approaches, subjects are constructed neither as determined by the conditions nor as autonomous, but instead always able to act: respectively within certain 'possibility spaces' (*Möglichkeitsräume*) (Holzkamp, 1983, pp. 367 for Critical Psychology), or within power-structured contexts (Grossberg, 1997 for Cultural Studies). Thus Cultural Studies and Critical Psychology view individuals as principally able to actively interpret, deal with, and relate to the conditions and representations that manifest in their everyday lives and therefore as – at least potentially – able to act upon and alter contexts and shift social meanings.

2.1 The mediation of individual and society: Representations and social meanings

Both Cultural Studies and Critical Psychology aim to reconstruct and understand the social contexts, power relations and social conditions in which social phenomena, that is to say, experiences, interpretations, and actions of individuals are embedded and by which they are influenced (Grossberg, 1997, pp. 257-262 for Cultural Studies; Markard, 2000, p. 18 for Critical Psychology). In order to analyze the relationship between social conditions, contexts, and individuals, Cultural Studies and Critical Psychology focus on social meanings and social knowledge, which Holzkamp conceptualizes as the sphere of mediation between subject and societal conditions, whereas Hall conceives them as a discursively mediated expression of society.

Analyses in **Cultural Studies** turn towards the relationships between discourses, which are understood as always imbued with power (relations), and social practices, as social meanings are produced within these relationships. These meanings are of particular interest because everyday cultural practices, interpretations, and actions of individuals are, in turn, based on these meanings produced within said power structures. Cultural Studies aim to analyze these social practices in relation to power (Engelmann, 1999, pp. 18).

To conceptualize the relationship between social meanings, power, subject and society Hall initially draws on the linguistic semiotic approach of representations analysis as suggested by Ferdinand de Saussure. Sassure's approach focuses on the production of meaning through language (Hall, 1997b). Following Sassure, Hall describes the production of meanings as the interaction of two processes, or of two systems of representations (ibid., p. 16ff): firstly, concepts in the sense of "the system by which all sorts of objects, people and events are correlated with a set of […] *mental representations"* (ibid., p. 17) and, secondly, language understood as words, sounds, or signs.

> The first enables us to give meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalences between things – people, objects, events, abstract ideas, etc. – and our system of concepts, our conceptual maps. The second depends on constructing a set of correspondences between our conceptual map and a set of signs, arranged or organized into various languages which stand for or represent those concepts. The relation between 'things', concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call 'representation'. (ibid., p. 19)

Both, signifier and signified are "the result of a system of social conventions specific to each society and to specific historical moments" (ibid., p. 32) and therefore meanings "can never be finally fixed but are always subject to change [...]. There is thus no single, unchanging, universal 'true meaning'" (ibid.).

Hall merges this concept with reflections in the works of Michel Foucault on the relevance of power in the process of the production of meanings. Hall focuses on socio-historically situated processes of knowledge production in discourses and their involvement with power relations, in which discourse refers not only to language, but also to non-linguistic social practices. This discursive approach to representations as the production of social knowledge in particular contexts is interested, firstly, in the way in which knowledge production is connected to power and, secondly, in the effects and consequences of representation: "It examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge a particular discourse produces connects with

power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied" (ibid., 1997a, p. 6). In the discursive approach the specific regime of representation in a particular historical context and its specific form in a particular time and place are of interest (ibid.). Discourse, Foucault argues, "defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others" (ibid., 1997b, p. 44). Discursive formations produce social regulation and manifest efficaciously as dominant ways of conceiving social phenomena, in particular forms of knowledge in texts, codes of conduct and institutionalized spaces.

To explain which representations, which social knowledge becomes an accepted part of a discourse and manifests powerfully in constructions of social reality at what point and under which circumstances, Hall theorizes knowledge and power, in reference to Foucault, as directly implying one another, as power-knowledge (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). Thus, the productivity of powerful and valid knowledge is not the result of an 'objective truth', but emerges from relations of power and knowledge, from strategies and techniques that take effect in particular situations, historical contexts and institutional regimes (ibid., pp. 26-27, ibid., 1980). "The important thing here", argues Foucault (1980, p. 131),

> is that truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power: […] truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‚general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

'Truth' as a system of rules and ordering practices, by which assertions are produced, regulated and disseminated, is contested (ibid., 133). Knowledge and power connect in discourse. According to Foucault, power is based on knowledge and makes use of knowledge, while power, in turn, (re-)produces knowledge: "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (ibid. 1977, p. 27).

The importance of Foucault's power concept for Cultural Studies can hardly be underestimated, as Marchart (2008, p. 181) states. Cultural Studies reject (as does Foucault) the conception of power as a binarity of powerful versus powerless, as clear-cut distinction between sovereign and subject. Instead, Cultural Studies emphasize an understanding of power as productive – including in a positive way. As Foucault (1980, p. 119) points out: "If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?" This is the reason, Foucault argues, why power is forceful: because it is productive. "[I]t traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression" (ibid.). According to Foucault, there can never be just one central point or a unique source from which power arises. Instead, he argues, "power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization" (ibid., 1978, p. 92). Hence, Foucault does not view power as a possession, but describes it as de-centralised, relativistic, circulating, unstable and dynamic, contradictory, situated and contextually effective. Those dynamic force relations take effect in different strategies and techniques. They crystallize in all parts of society and everyday life and are, Foucault claims, embodied "in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies" (ibid., p. 93) as well as in the subjects. To Foucault, power is ubiquitous and systemic, but not absolute.

Hence, Foucault argues, studying the subject is not possible without taking power into account, because "while the human subject is placed in relations of production and of signification, he is equally placed in power relations which are very complex" (1982, 778). Correspondingly, subjects have to be understood as involved with power and discourse in different – perhaps even contradictory – ways: as affirmative and resistant, as participating in power and opposing it. With respect to Foucault, Hall concentrates on concrete and local, but nevertheless abstract, power relations and seeks to reveal how they influence the production of particular 'truths' in discourses. Moreover, Hall aims to highlight the subject as an active, experiencing and acting part of these relations, namely in the form of his concept of articulation (see below).

In **Critical Psychology** as developed, among others, by Klaus Holzkamp, social meanings play an equally decisive role. It is assumed that society in its entirety is not directly accessible to the subjects living within this society, but that societal conditions are only partially represented to individuals through meanings, or societal meaning structures. Thus, in Critical Psychology, social meanings have the function of connecting and mediating between societal

context and individuals. However, even if these conditions are seen as very important for individuals and their actions, they are not regarded as determining. Holzkamp (1997, p. 261) states that the world does not simply reveal itself to people as conditions that entail certain actions. Instead, these conditions are represented in specific meanings and these specific meanings represent possibilities and restrictions for an individual's actions. Thus, according to Critical Psychology, our relationship to the world is characterized by socially mediated 'possibility relationships' (*Möglichkeitsbeziehungen*). Individuals are always able to act and relate to a set of possibilities that reflect societal conditions mediated through particular meanings.

Societal conditions become individual premises for actions – not their causes – on the basis of which individuals may claim their action in a particular situation to be 'reasonable', 'appropriate', or 'in one's own interest' (Holzkamp, 1997, p. 261). Or, in other words, social conditions become individually meaningful as opportunities to act or as constraints on those opportunities, emphasizing the embeddedness of particular situations of everyday life in societal structures and structures of dominance and power. Correspondingly, Critical Psychologists claim that neither situations nor individuals' experiences and actions can be understood without studying social structures as the framework of particular experiences and actions (Markard, 2010, p. 170). At the same time, individuals are viewed as principally able to consciously relate to the socially created possibilities in question, yet their actions, interpretations, and opinions are rooted, just like their premises, in the circumstances, not arbitrariness.

Studies of Critical Psychology, then, always take the complex relationship between determination and subjectivity/freedom of conduct of everyday life into account (Holzkamp, 1983, p. 345). One key concern in Critical Psychology's analyses is the investigation of the mediation between societal structure and individual or, more precisely, the examination of the societal mediatedness of individual actions (Markard, 2000, p. 14). Thus, Critical Psychology seeks to comprehend the socio-structural mediation of individuals' action possibilities in immediate situations.

Against this backdrop, the subject with its capacity to act represents the starting point of investigation in Critical Psychology. Critical Psychology aims to accomplish a psychology from the standpoint of the subject and therefore claims its approach to be a subject-scientific theory. In analyses of Critical Psychology, researchers ask about the subjective grounds for action. They are interested in how the individual meaningfully interprets and relates to social meanings in particular situations. Seeing as actions are grounded subjectively in meaning that reflects the individual's possibility relationship, social meanings can be analyzed

with regard to their particular mediating function and their relation to the societal conditions to which they point. This way, certain hints can be reconstructed that provide information about a subjective and context-specific action scope with regard to a particular problem. In doing so, the individual's concrete life circumstances and are viewed as part of societal meaning structures that become premises of the individual's diverse and contradictory reasons to act. Josef Held (1994, pp. 112-113) argues that it cannot be assumed that all reasons for action indicated by individuals are solely individually constructed, but that conventional reasoning patterns and options for acting, as they are offered in public discourse, are part of the construction process as well. Therefore, Held stresses that it is important also to reflect on the social context in which the topic in question is situated.

Conducting science from the 'standpoint of the subject' not only involves a specific analytical perspective, but also implies "a particular form of discourse" (Holzkamp, 1997, p. 261). Subjects do not refer to their own actions as 'condition-event-relationship', but rather describe their actions as reasonable and well-founded based on their subjectively relevant premises for action. Therefore, Holzkamp considers 'reason discourse' – as opposed to 'conditioning discourse' as in traditional variable psychology – to be crucial. The starting point for the reconstruction of the special relationship between premises and subjective grounds for action are the reasons for action, but also those for opinions, appraisals, views, or attitudes on social phenomena as held by the subject. Subjective reasons for action therefore are considered to be a further "category of mediation" (Holzkamp, 1983, p. 348) "between overall societal requirements and the subject's conduct of life" (ibid., 2013/1988, p. 42). The subjective reasons point to "societal conditions/meanings that are objectively given", but "only become decisive for my actions to the degree that they become premises for the reasons of my actions" (ibid., p. 47). The particularity of reasons for action can only be grasped from the standpoint of the subject, as reasons are always 'first-person'. But even if Critical Psychology as a science from the standpoint of the subject chooses the subject and its reasons for action as starting point, it must be emphasized that it is not the individuals and their actions and experiences Critical Psychology is primarily interested in. Subject-scientific studies are about the world as it is perceived by acting, thinking, and experiencing subjects (Markard, 2000, p.18). Critical Psychology pays special attention to the relationship between individual and society and to the societal mediation of conditions of action as they are perceived by subjects: as restrictive, as enabling or contradictory. That is why, as Markard (ibid.) stresses, subject-scientific statements are neither statements about people nor statements which aim to classify people, but statements about experienced possibilities for and/or

restrictions on action that may be generalized. "[T]he object of subject science research *is the mode of subjective experiences of objective societal possibilities of and hindrances to act"* (Holzkamp, 2013/1988, p. 44).

2.2 Subjects with agency: Subject positions and possibility spaces

In both cultural studies and Critical Psychology, individuals are conceptualized as endowed with agency, albeit within certain limits and not entirely autonomous, generally capable of dealing with social meanings and actively relating to social contexts and conditions.

The complex conjuncture of conditions that structures experiences, interpretations and actions which **Cultural Studies** seek to reconstruct in terms of its possibilities and limitations for the subject, consists of particular contextual and power-charged discursive formations and practices of social relevance.

Hall's reflections on the relations between the individual and the social contexts, respectively, are subsumed in his concept of articulation**.** Referring to the theories developed by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, Hall considers discourses to be the expression of the social and of society, which consists of diverse articulations. Hall defines articulations as forms of connection between different elements of social reality, such as meanings, experiences, emotions, interests, and always power, too, which become relevant only in a particular context and only temporarily. Articulation, Hall (1986, p. 53) explains,

> is the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? The so-called 'unity' of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness'. The 'unity' which matters is a linkage between the articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected.

Thus, an articulation is dynamic and flexible and not eternal. It is a connection or link that

> requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which […] has to be constantly renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new

> connections – re-articulations – being forged (Hall, 1985, pp.113-114, footnote 2).

Hall's analytical focus is on the power-charged articulations between discourse and subject: on the connections between social meanings offered by discourse and individuals who relate to those meanings in particular ways. According to Hall, subjects are always an active part of articulations. Following Foucault, he posits that discourse creates and provides subject positions into which subjects are 'interpellated'. Yet, Hall criticizes Foucault's theory for the fact that "[d]iscursive subject positions become a priori categories which individuals seem to occupy in an unproblematic fashion" (Hall, 1996a, 10) and that "[t]here is certainly no single switch to 'agency', to intention and volition" (ibid., 13). Hall claims that, in order to occupy a subject position, the active moment of identification by the subject itself is always needed. To him, the "result of a successful articulation or 'chaining' of the subject into the flow of the discourse" (ibid., 6) are identities. According to Hall, these positions constructed in discourse ought to be seen as complex and contradictory and the process of identification with these positions as not always deliberate or freely chosen. Identities are thus complex and diverse processes of articulation between individuals and discourse. Hall (1996a, pp. 5-6) describes identity as a

> point of *suture* between on the one hand, the discourses and practices which attempt to ‚interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‚spoken'. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us.

Moreover, Hall stresses that subjects identify with diverse subject positions in different contexts and also produce and perform these positions in different ways. He clearly rejects ideas that see the hailing of the subject by discourse as equivalent to becoming and being a subject, for these ideas deny the subject's opportunities to take part in the appropriation of subject positions assigned by discursive practices.

Using the concept of articulation, the analytical perspective can be directed towards the mechanisms that constitute particular possibilities to occupy subject positions and cause subjects to identify with specific subject positions, which reflect discoursive formations and what those positions mean to them. The focus is on how subjects occupy these positions, how they

> fashion, stylize, produce and 'perform' these positions, and why they never do so completely, for once and all time, and some never do, or are in a constant, agnostic process of struggling with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating the normative or regulative rules with which they confront and regulate themselves (ibid., p. 14).

The question arises how articulations, rearticulations, disarticulations, and thus social meaning are (re-)produced and shifted. Given that it is the individual who accomplishes articulations and who itself is the site of ongoing struggles about articulation, Hall argues that the emergence of articulations can only be reconstructed if the relation between subjects and their agency is considered (Winter, 2009, p. 205). In the course of reflecting upon these connections, different relations of power that frame the subject's agency in a particular context must be taken into account, seeing as the subject's possibilities to act cannot be concluded simply from his or her position in the system of social differences. Agency always has to be specifically contextualized, since there is no such thing as a general theory of agency. "[A]gency can only be described in its contextual enactments. Agency is never transcendent; it always exists in the differential and competing relations among the historical forces at play" (Grossman, 1992, p. 123).

An understanding of individuals as described above is crucial to research in **Critical Psychology** as well. Individuals have to be understood as subjects endowed with agency whose actions are mediated by social meanings and grounded in societal conditions that are not determining, but offer possibilities for (and limitations to) action. Subjects can always "*consciously orient themselves* towards the situations as a 'possibility', that is, they always have the *alternative* of acting otherwise or not at all" (Holzkamp, 1992, p. 198). They are capable of relating in a subjectively meaningful way to the conditions as presented to them in a particular situation. The scope of action possibilities is relative to the individual's position in society. Holzkamp (1983, pp. 367) theorizes the subject's possibilities to act and relate to his or her life conditions in the concept of the 'subjective possibility space'.

According to Holzkamp (1983, p. 368), the extent of the subject's scope of action, complete with its possibilities and limitations, is shaped by the formation of meanings, representing societal structures as perceived by the subject in a concrete life situation and social position. Hence, spaces of possibilities are always specific and individual even if determined by societal meaning structures and can only be recognized from the particular standpoint of the subject in a given situation. This first-person perspective is always "personal and societal at once, because structures of social meaning […] flow into the premises for each person's subjective reasons for action" (Motzkau/Schraube, 2015, p. 282).

According to Holzkamp (1983, pp. 352), the subject's agency is characterized by the 'double possibility' of action, either to pursue agency within the confines of the socially given or permitted possibilities (restrictive agency) or to try to transcend those limits (together with others) and thereby extend agency (generalized agency) (ibid.; ibid., pp. 379; Markard, 2010, p. 169). Markard (2010, p. 169) argues that this 'double possibility' between objective and subjective determination also involves a 'double problem', namely that of arranging oneself with the given restrictive conditions and thus sacrificing opportunities in life or risking conflicts in an attempt to extend possibilities in life. I do not want to elaborate further on these categories of agency (see for example Holzkamp, 1983, 1990a), but instead to highlight the point of the concept I consider crucial: according to Critical Psychology, individuals are not only subjected to the conditions under which they live and limited in their actions by those structures and conditions. Instead, Critical Psychology argues that there is, at least potentially, always the possibility to influence and change those restrictive conditions that impede one's agency and life quality. Hence, the two-sided interrelationship that constitutes individuals as producers of life conditions, in which they are also subjects, is crucial to Critical Psychology. Agency is the basic category for explaining and analyzing these complex relationships. To Holzkamp, the specificity of human beings originates in human agency and the basic possibility to extend control over conditions of life.

2.3. Intervention and Transition: Rearticulations and Extending the Disposal over Conditions

Both Cultural Studies and Critical Psychology are not just interested in comprehending and explaining certain phenomena but aim to offer a perspective for change as well. Cultural Studies seek rearticulations and the shifting of meanings to change contexts through scientific study, whereas Critical Psychology aims to develop action opportunities which help expand the subjective space of possibilities through intervention in restrictive social conditions.

Cultural Studies is often described as a 'political project of theory' (Hall, 2000a; Hall, 2000b, pp. 36; Grossberg, 1997, 264). Projects of Cultural Studies are always political and seek not just to understand the structures of power, but also the possibilities of struggles, resistance, and change (Grossberg, 1997, p. 253). Lawrence Grossberg characterizes cultural studies as "a certain kind of intellectual practice", "a certain way of embodying the belief that what we do can actually matter", "a way of politicizing theory and theorizing politics" (ibid.). "[C]ultural studies matters", Grossberg claims, "because it is about how to keep

political work alive in an age of shrinking possibilities" (ibid., 1997, p. 252). Cultural Studies pursue critical engagement with and active participation in the 'struggle for representation' (Hall, 2004a, p. 165). The "will to knowledge" is crucial here: Grossberg states that cultural studies is committed to producing scientific knowledge about complexities "to gain a better understanding of the relations of power […] in a particular context" (Grossberg, 1997, p. 253). A "knowledge that both helps people understand that the world is changeable and that offers some direction for how to change it" (ibid., p. 264). "For Cultural Studies, there is always something at stake" (ibid., 1992, p. 18). Cultural Studies is about questioning common understandings and beliefs and shifting socially constructed representations, since such representations are relevant factors in how people shape their world. They are the contexts that frame individuals' actions.

In the pursuit of these objectives, radical contextualism represents the theoretical and methodological point of reference within Cultural Studies (ibid., 1997, pp. 253-262). Radical contextualism proceeds from the basic assumption that social phenomena are always dynamically articulated in various ways. Contexts are understood as the particular intertwined formations of forces at a given point in time, in which concrete social practices and phenomena are embedded and unfold their effects (Marchart, 2008, p. 39). That is why the context of social phenomena "is not merely background but the very conditions of possibility of something […]. It is precisely what one is trying to analyze and it is the most difficult thing to construct" (ibid., p. 252). Contexts are not simply given, but have to be (re-)constructed.

As the context of a particular research project is not known beforehand, "it has to be defined by the project, by the political question that is at stake" (ibid., p. 255). Scholars use particular theoretical perspectives and questions as resources that not only help (re-)construct the context, but also allow – and this is a key objective of Cultural Studies – to contribute to the transformation of contexts (Winter, 1999, p. 182): on the one hand, as mentioned above, by producing a body of knowledge that helps to understand social practices and phenomena as well as to identify possibilities of action and resistance in formations of power. On the other hand, Cultural Studies takes part in the struggle for representation (Hall 2004a, 165). This entails, for example, investigating and questioning commonly accepted patterns of interpretation and articulation with regard to power relations and their functions. One example could be to consider ideologies of inequality from the perspective of those who are restricted by the effects of these inequalities in their everyday life and to investigate meanings and articulations from their point of view. This way, the distinct conjunctures of the forces at play in society and social relations can be

analyzed and described from a specific perspective. At the same time connections can be drawn that challenge popular social meanings and interpretation patterns, shift them, and effectively rearticulate meanings:

> If a context can be understood as the relationships that have been made by the operation of power, in the interests of certain positions of power, the struggle to change the context involves the struggle to understand those relations, to locate those relations that can be disarticulated and to then struggle to rearticulate them. (Grossberg, 1997, p. 261)

Following this, from the viewpoint of Cultural Studies, knowledge production by means of research which seeks to "construct the relations between discourse, everyday life and the machineries of power" (Winter 1999, p. 26) is understood as interventionist.

A similarly interventionist aspect of research conducted in the framework of **Critical Psychology** can be found in the research process itself, which aims to offer the subjects who are part of the process the possibility to discover and reflect upon their own social positionings and subjective possibility spaces, discern restrictive conditions, and – together with others – try to influence and change these conditions with the aim of extending agency (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 31; 1983, p. 354, p. 545). Hence, research in Critical Psychology claims to be not merely *about* but *for* people.

This objective is deduced from the subject-scientific paradigm introduced above, which requires taking the standpoint of the subject as the starting point for all research and conducting inquiries into reason discourse. Because "reasons for action are always 'first-person' and thus 'my' reasons" (Holzkamp, 1990b, p. 3), research questions must not be questions about people, but instead research as a whole has to focus on the questions expressed by the subjects concerned. Hence, as Ute Osterkamp puts it, research from the standpoint of the subject "is not about making people a problem but to take up the problems of people" (ibid., p.4).

Against this background, approaches and methods are required that help participating subjects to clarify and alter their own experiences and life practices. Critical Psychology research aims to support all research participants in defining their own standpoint and involvement in the interplay between objective and subjective determination and to contribute to the realization of their subjective possibility spaces (Markard, 2010, p. 171; Holzkamp, 1983, p. 354, p. 545; ibid., 1985, p. 31) by developing theories that facilitate a depiction of one's "own interests, motivations, reasons, and consequences of action in important or problematic life situations" (Markard, 2000, 15). Research that aims to be 'for' people – in the sense that researchers and the subjects 'to be researched'

investigate the restrictions of their subjective possibility spaces and search for possibilities to extend their agency – requires a research design that considers all subjects involved as active participants seeking clarification and insight. Therefore, research has to offer spaces of collaborative investigations where processes of – even controversial and contradictory – examination and reflection can take place to facilitate the self-understanding of one's own conscious and unconscious involvement ('*Selbstverständigung*'). According to subject-scientific theory and its premises, subjects can never be the object of research, because reasons are always 'first-person' and therefore only accessible from the standpoint of the subject. Consequently, those who are 'to be researched' are conceptualized as co-researchers in Critical Psychology.[1]

2.4 Reflexivity: Radical contextualism and intersubjectivity

Cultural Studies as well as Critical Psychology regard researchers and 'researched' as subjects with agency who influence the research process. Both approaches stress the need for reflection in this regard.

The concept of radical contextualism in **Cultural Studies** has a more general impact on the notion of reflection in research processes. The demand for radical contextualism (Grossberg 1997, pp. 252-268) and the claim to analyze the particular connection of knowledge and power in specific relations at a certain time and place calls for a reflective research practice. Research conducted along the lines of Cultural Studies is characterized by a practice of constant reflection on the contexts in which knowledge is produced. The practice of Cultural Studies is in this sense self-reflective: "the analyst is also a participant in the very practices, formations, and contexts he or she is analyzing" (ibid., p. 267). According to Grossberg, recognizing the researcher's involvement implies reflecting "on one's own relation to the various trajectories and dimensions, places and spaces, of the context one is exploring and mapping: theoretical, political, and institutional" (ibid., p. 268). Reflexivity in Cultural Studies is thus "not so much a question of identity, or of a politics of location", "but a matter of a form of discursive practice and an analysis of institutional conditions" (ibid.). Consequently, the concept of radical contextualism is at the same time a concept of reflexivity. It includes the researcher as well as the research process as aspects of the context of knowledge production that need to be scrutinized and reflected upon with respect to power relations and corresponding effects.

[1] The term 'co-researcher' tries to counteract the objectification of individuals in research processes (Holzkamp, 1983, 540-545) and to highlight the participatory approach of research. For ambivalences of this term and other terms for those subjects who are to be researched in qualitative research see: Scharathow, 2014, pp. 64-65.

The need for systematic reflexivity in **Critical Psychology** stems primarily from its research aspiration to simultaneously strive for problem-centered clarification and to carry out research from the standpoint the subject – which for the researcher ultimately entails conducting research from the standpoint of another subject. First of all, the question arises how it is even possible to carry out research on subjective reasons for action from a subject-standpoint that is not one's own, if we accept that reasons for action are always first-person and can therefore, in the sense of a premise-reason-connection and subjective function, only be described and comprehended from the subject's standpoint (Holzkamp, 1997, p. 261; ebd. 1990b; Markard, 2000, p. 15)? Are specific contexts of meaning, subjective relevances and interpretations accessible and comprehensible from the outside at all?

Holzkamp (1997, p. 261) assumes that only the subject can have reasons for his or her actions, which can never be fully grapsed by anyone else. Yet, according to him, it is possible to take up another subject's standpoint, or at least to try to do so. Holzkamp substantiates this possibility by reference to the concept of intersubjectivity, i.e. the intersubjective context of meaning and reasons. He argues (1991, p.72) that intersubjectivity arises

> because our daily world consists of a generally accessible *social nexus* of meanings in the sense of *generalized action possibilities*. When other people realize such action possibilities, their actions and subjective situations also become meaningful for me, that is, understood as *grounded.*

Even if the particular premises of someone's action are not known, they nevertheless remain comprehensible in principle. Hence, because of the objective societal life conditions, individual actions and experiences are generally understandable and accessible to anyone living under the same conditions. Thus, individual experiences and actions are merely one variant of experiencing and acting in society. That is why, on a more abstract level, experiences and actions point to societal conditions that affect the possibility spaces of others as well. Consequently, intersubjectivity refers to "the mediating processes […] through which my situation becomes […] accessible as an aspect of my socially meaningful actions" (ibid., 73). In Critical Psychology

> social relations at the human level are intersubjective relations, that is, relations in which different subjective 'centers of intentionality' are related to one another. Thus at any given moment, in that I perceive the other person from my standpoint, I perceive at the same time that he or she perceives me from his or her standpoint as someone who is perceiving him or her, and in this sense our perspectives cross over into each other. (ibid.)

Subjectivity is therefore always intersubjectivity at the same time. Against this backdrop, it becomes obvious that researchers, as ‘co-researchers’ in the research process, are also part of an intersubjective relation and communicate as subjects who feel, think, and act within certain social conditions (Holzkamp, 1983, p. 544). However, their respective subjectivities are nevertheless an inevitable part of the interaction. Holzkamp states that it is possible to adopt another subject’s standpoint, but not without involving one’s own subjectivity. Consequently,

> as a researcher, one does not relate one's theories and procedures merely to others, keeping oneself out of it, but rather sees oneself as a subject fully involved in them. […] [N]ot only the subjectivity of the other, but also the overlapping subjectivity of the researcher, will belong to the empirical that it is psychology's job to research. (ibid., 1992, pp. 76-77)

Reflexivity is necessary with regard to social positions and perspectives, simultaneously as an object of research and instrument of knowledge production.

3. Discussion

British Cultural Studies, particularly the concept of articulation as introduced by Hall, and perspectives of German Critical Psychology show similarities in their objectives. Still, they differ in their theoretical conceptualization of the relationship between subject, power, and society. Consequently, I elaborate on two major differences in the two theorizations because they have particular relevance for research practices.

Power, or power- or force-relations play a decisive role in both Critical Psychology and Cultural Studies. Yet, there are two distinct underlying notions of power. In Critical Psychology, power is mainly understood as inherent in societal conditions that can be objectified. Power is therefore conceptualized as domination. In this concept, social conditions that restrict or extend possibility spaces seem to be opposed to individuals as subjects with agency, even though the relation is mediated through the level of meaning. Cultural Studies, on the other hand, conceptualize power, with reference to Foucault, as dynamic and flexible force-relations, as formations of power-knowledge that manifest differently in distinct contexts in the form of (embattled) meanings, articulations, and subjects. Power-knowledge effectively pervades social relations at every level in dynamic, and often contradictory, ways. In cultural studies, social relations are understood as interactions that are traversed by power in many ways

and effectively constitute meaning. They find expression in discourses as well as, mediated by discourse, in concrete social practices.

From a social-scientific perspective, as well as from a research-theoretical point of view the concept of power as represented in cultural studies allows for analyzing the power dimension of social reality in greater detail than the Critical Psychology's power concept does. While the latter tends to paint a reduced picture of reality, therefore also providing reduced analytical insight, the concept of power in Cultural Studies – always articulated with social practices, relations, and subjects as well as an analytical focus on relations and interactions – additionally allows researchers to take into account those power relations that are in danger of being overlooked by the approach of Critical Psychology. For example, the restrictions suggested by subjective reasons for actions do not predominantly point to a generalizable societal level, but to social relations primarily in the immediate social vicinity as well. However they do not need to be of prime relevance in each situation. Although Critical Psychology's category of immediate life circumstances (*Lebenslage*), which describes the situation of the individual, "somehow includes 'the social'", as Josef Held (1994, p. 45) states, these aspects of social life are awarded little importance and are "not regarded separately" (ibid.). However, it is precisely the embeddedness of individuals and their interactions in social contexts that are decisive when it comes to the investigation of agency in relations characterized by power and inequalities. For it is 'the social' that mediates between subject and society as Held (ibid., pp. 43) assumes as well. In Cultural Studies, the social is the field where social meanings and articulations are constructed and negotiated – always embedded in power relations and discursive formations. Correspondingly social relations in the sense of relations with and within the social vicinity, in which individuals and their social practices are embedded, are highly relevant and have to be taken into account.

One advantage, then, is that Critical Psychology focuses on agency, where Cultural Studies concentrates on social constructions and articulations. Cultural Studies not only emphasize the necessity to systematically adopt a power-analytical perspective in the analysis of the construction of articulations and to take the dynamics and the non-closure of articulations into account, they also stress the crucial role agency plays in the constitution and shifting of articulations as well as in processes of de-articulation. But even though this is the case, Cultural Studies are rather vague with regard to the analysis of the nexus between subjects equipped with agency and the production of articulations and re-articulations. Friedrich Krotz (2008, p. 132) criticizes that Cultural Studies only insufficiently take into account the creativity and individuality of human agency which, for example, is connected in particular ways to the subject's biography.

According to Brigitte Hipfl and Matthias Marschik (2009, p. 316) the "subjective factor", the subjective experiences, "have largely vanished" from current Cultural Studies.

Precisely this 'subjective factor', the subjective meanings and experiences, and individual agency, takes centre stage in Critical Psychology research. With its concept of 'subjective possibility spaces' and 'condition-meaning-reasoning'-analyses in reason discourse, Critical Psychology offers analytical instruments that enable the investigation of concrete experiences and particular problems in their social mediatedness, without the subject – complete with his or her agency and embeddedness in multiple social contexts – disappearing from view.

The different focal points and areas of attention in Cultural Studies and Critical Psychology, respectively, also entail distinct approaches to research design and analytical perspectives on empirical data. Yet, this is where I see the potential for qualitative research: The combination of both theoretical and methodological perspectives and selected aspects thereof offers a broader and therefore more differentiated analytical perspective for conceptualizing and conducting research projects.[2]

In the following section, I illustrate, based on some selected aspects, what the combination of British Cultural Studies and German Critical Psychology may imply for qualitative research projects aiming to reconstruct the conditions of action in relation to an individual's agency in the subject area of power and inequality.

4. Implications for research work

With regard to the methodical procedure, the presented premises in Cultural Studies and Critical Psychology suggest a choice of instruments that encourage the subjects who are 'to be researched' or, indeed, the 'co-researchers', to elaborate on their perspectives on their lifeworlds, their conduct of everyday life, and their day-to-day problems in such a way that particularly their assigned meanings, knowledge, explanations, and interpretations find expression, for example in descriptions of situations, reasons for action, and argumentation. These interpretations, meanings, and reasons indicated by the subjects who take part in a research project can then be analyzed (possibly, but not necessarily, together with the 'co-researchers'): on the one hand, with regard to articulations with power, discourse and social relations and, on the other hand, with an eye to subjective meanings and their reference to social and societal conditions as premises for actions, perspectives, and interpretations. Moreover, according to

[2] See Scharathow 2014 for an example.

radical contextualism, different research projects ought to be accompanied by the combination of different theories and methods or even the development of new ones ('bricolage' in Cultural Studies) with regard to pragmatic and strategic/political principles (Winter, 2005, p. 205). Furthermore, according to a subject-scientific approach, methods should be used that facilitate a good intersubjective relationship between researcher and 'co-researcher' in order to devise research from the standpoint of the subject. Such research designs support processes of self-understanding of one's own conscious and unconscious involvement and the collaborative investigation of possibility spaces. With regard to the relations of power and difference that frame research projects, it is necessary to select or develop procedures that allow taking the 'co-researchers', i.e. those whose perspectives are being researched, into account as subjects who are ambiguous, variedly positioned in social relations, and have agency – and to treat and present them as such.

Essentially, both the researchers and the individuals whose self-positioning is researched are subjects of research, whose theories, interpretations, feelings and actions have an impact on the research process. Equally categorically – following especially the theorizations of Cultural Studies – there can never be such thing as a hierarchy-free relation between the involved parties in the research process. As a result, the different, intertwined places and positionings in a social formation of context-specific (power-) relations as well as the action possibilities and subjective perspectives that are influenced by them and manifest in the interactive process of interpreting, negotiating and constructing meaning ought to be reflexively included in the process of knowledge production: as an instrument of cognition, not as an aspect, that needs to be eliminated.

Reflexivity – understood as systematic contextualization and constant practice of reflecting on and questioning the different dimensions of the place at which and from which research is conducted with regard to possible influences – is an indispensable part of research and knowledge production. 'Places' are to be understood as individually occupied and performed subject positions in a social order, specific articulations between subject and discourse. Thus, objective access to social reality cleared from any subjectivity is not possible and, consequently, neither is 'understanding' in this sense. I try to see and understand the world from another subject's position, I can, at best, achieve an approximation. Correspondingly, research cannot be about adopting the very same perspective or 'occupying' the position of another subject, but should always be about its reconstruction or, to put it in terms of Cultural Studies, the (co-)construction of subject positionings.

With regard to knowledge production in research, it is therefore crucial to constantly keep asking questions about the power dimensions of social relations

and conditions to which subjects refer in their interpretations and positionings and in the framework of which interactions, experiences, actions, reasons, etc. take place. This is followed by the question which aspects of a particular context become premises for action and make a specific action possible in the first place. These questions are highly relevant for the (re-)construction of the context(s) of a research project and for interpretative work with empirical data. Following these assumptions, data interpretation and social science explanations are always constructions themselves, influenced by the subjectivity and the context knowledge of the researcher(s). All theorizations and interpretations in social research are, "however carefully tested and supported, in the end 'authored'" (Hall, 1996b, p. 14).

As a consequence, neither research nor researcher can be 'objective' or 'neutral'. Moreover, studies in the subject area of power, difference and inequality, studies along with the corresponding findings, can never *not* be political. They always represent a statement in political discourses – with all ensuing effects. In this respect, I consider not only reflexivity to be vital, but also find myself in agreement with the spirit by the claim to critically intervene in social inequalities through research, as put forth by both research approaches. The latter may imply providing knowledge that is conducive to a better understanding of the relations of power at play and develop corresponding resistance strategies and actions. It also involves critically questioning representations and articulations that are widely accepted as 'truths' and investigating them with regard to their constructionist character and embeddedness in power relations. That way, research and scientific knowledge production can intervene in the constant struggle over meaning and representation through re-articulations. Re-articulations, in turn, alter contexts and conditions that, for example, make discriminatory meaning production and exclusionary practices possible. Moreover, interventionist research could imply research processes that offer opportunities for reflection, self-understanding and clarifications with regard to one's own subject position and actions within societal and social relations. At best, this can be conducive to revealing how one's own actions are complicit in circumstances that influence action conditions in negative (or positive) ways and to thinking about how these conditions can be changed or what opportunities there may be to expand the scope of (recalcitrant) action. Of course, in the face of problems that require collective efforts at a structural level, the latter can only be accomplished in full awareness of the limitations to individual agency (Huck, 2006, p. 126, as cited in Markard, 2010, p. 176). That said, on the level of individual action, it may imply becoming aware of the societal/social dimension of one's 'own' problems during the research process and realizing that these problems are neither a matter of

individual responsibility alone nor solvable at an individual level. One possible consequence could be to search for ways of acting that question social meanings and social orders and disturb the latter in their ostensible normality and acceptance.

5. Conclusion

Qualitative social research aiming to be critical (of society) and to contribute to the struggle against social inequalities and power imbalances has to question the acceptance and supposed self-evidence of mainstream categories and constructions of social meaning/representations. This implies analyzing social categories and constructions with regard to power relations and underscoring their contingency as well as carefully examining their distinct functions and meanings for different actors and for the social order of society. Moreover, it is relevant to emphasize the complex and often contradictory connections and interdependencies between subjective experience and action and social circumstances and to highlight both the conditions that make *this* experience and *this* action possible in the first place and the conditions that lead to unequal action possibilities. If science wishes to contribute to breaking down restrictive structures and obstructive conditions, those 'possibility-conditions' that entail unequal chances of participation and action must be revealed and criticized. This, however, has to be achieved without losing sight of the subjects – as endowed with agency, participating in the construction of social meanings and conditions, and as actors who are potentially able to resist, act unruly, and question and shift articulations. For that purpose, theorizations and methodical approaches as introduced by German Critical Psychology and British Cultural Studies can be extremely useful.

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