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Abstract

Julian Eckl

The paper reconstructs typical requirements of empirical power analysis that have been identified by social scientist and explains in what sense an ethnographic approach helps to address them. Moreover, the paper draws on the author's own research in order to briefly illustrate what kind of insights can be produced in this manner and what practical challenges might have to be dealt with. From a methodological perspective, the paper highlights the complementarity between participant observation and document analysis for the purpose of studying power empirically.

Manaíra Assunção

This discussion paper is in dialogue with an input paper focussed on different forms of power analysis. The input paper provides one line of inquiry on global health actors and their institutionalised practices in malaria policies and governance reforms. This discussion paper is based on another line of investigation consisting of a doctoral research on South-South cooperation (SSC) and health development. This paper builds parallels between the two lines of inquiry, particularly the relation between power, experts and knowledge production, or what is defined as the micro layers of power analysis. It discusses two research methods – participant observation and narrative inquiry – employed in both investigations, respectively. It focuses on the methodological challenges raised by the adoption of a qualitative research design of inductive and iterative nature to epitomize the study of three big and very used concepts in the social sciences: power, knowledge and practices.

How Participant Observation and Document Analysis Can Contribute to an Empirical Study of Power (*Julian Eckl*)

1 Introduction

It does not take a social scientist to understand that politics is linked to power. It does not even take a social scientist to understand that the role of politics and power stretches beyond formal decision-making processes. Similarly, the recent election of Donald Trump as president of the United States has once more challenged the apparent boundary between scientific knowledge and political convictions since Trump uses his political office and his administration to question the validity of established research findings (Nuccitelli 2017).

While the omnipresence of politics and power is somewhat self-evident, there is still a need for social science analysis since it is conducted under specific premises and comes with particular demands. In other words, what should distinguish social scientists from various other commentators on contemporary politics is the specific manner in which these issues are addressed by them. In particular, this should be done in a systematic rather than in a selective and ad-hoc manner, which includes an interest in quotidian power relations beyond visible conflicts and an interest in the challenges and conditions of knowledge production. Moreover, the research process and its findings should be documented and presented in a manner that makes them open to scrutiny. The latter goal implies also that the research process is documented in terms of previous methodological discussions and that the findings are embedded into the existing conceptual-theoretical literature.¹

What these features of social science research mean in practice will vary. While research projects differ by obvious features such as research design, methodology, and substantive scope, even less obvious factors such as the specific format in which the research will

¹ While inductive research designs emphasise the need to at least retrospectively embed the findings into the broader literature, deductive research designs request the researcher to also derive the expectations from the existing literature and to do this already at the outset of the research process.

eventually be published, will shape the end product since each journal and each publisher puts emphasis on specific aspects of the research process and on specific aspects of the substantive findings. Finally, the end product will not only be influenced by editors and publishers but also by peer reviewers who play an equally important gate-keeping role in academic publishing.

In other words, social science research on politics will be distinct from other accounts and it is subject to particular rules of knowledge production but it is still not a monolithic enterprise: there is room for divergent approaches and even the realization of a well-planned project will usually not follow the textbook account since no textbook can anticipate and describe the myriad of practical challenges and contingencies that researchers will have to surmount.

Against the background of these considerations, the present paper poses two questions: What are typical requirements of empirical power analysis that have been identified by social scientist? To what extent can the methodological repertoire of ethnography help to address these requirements? In order to answer these questions, the paper proceeds in the following steps. First, it will briefly consider aspects of power analysis that tend to be recurrent points of discussion in any project on politics that tries to analyse power systematically. Moreover, the paper will point out what requirements of empirical power analysis have emerged from these discussions. In a second step, the paper will characterize ethnography as a research tradition that rests on three main pillars (participant observation, interviews, and artefact analysis, which includes the analysis of documents) and it will explain in what sense an ethnographic approach helps to address the requirements of power analysis that were described in the previous section. In a third step, the paper will draw on the author's own research in order to briefly illustrate what kind of insights can be produced in this manner and what practical challenges might have to be dealt with. This discussion will also highlight the complementarity between (synchronic) participant observation and (diachronic) document analysis.

2 Views of Power and the Power-Knowledge Relationship

As mentioned before, the link between politics and power is self-evident. What is often less clear, however, is the answer to the question of what different authors mean by “power”. Moreover, the tendency to constantly create new power terms – such as “structural power”, “compulsory power”, or “smart power” – has further contributed to the confusion around terminology.² This section will not even try to list or to discuss the various understandings of “power”; rather it will foreground typical aspects that tend to play a role in empirically grounded power analysis although not all researchers deal with them in the same way. In particular, they might disagree on the priority that should be given to each aspect and some might not be explicitly addressed at all. In other words, the typical aspects that will be presented in the following should not be understood as defining elements of empirical power analysis but as an account of the pool of elements that link different kinds of empirical power analysis via family resemblances.

A large part of empirical power analysis is based on a concept of power that describes power as a relationship in which a person (or group of persons) A does something that affects another person (or group of persons) B in a significant manner.³ This general concept of power is shared by at least three more specific views of power that disagree, however, on the question of how the different parts of this concept of power have to be interpreted and what additional conditions have to be met so that the relationship between A and B qualifies as a case of power. This mix of shared assumptions and divergent interpretations has important consequences for a project’s research design and methodology since researchers are requested to address concerns that are shared by the different views of power but face the challenge that not all views accept the same kind of evidence. The implications of this

² On “structural power” see, for example, Strange 1994 (but also Barnett/Duvall 2005); on “compulsory power” see Barnett/Duvall 2005; on smart power, see Nye 2011.

³ This concept of power has been referred to as “power over” and it has commonly been contrasted with “power to” and with “power with” (see, for example, Lukes 2005, Göhler 2009, and Allen 2009).

tension can be explained by taking a closer look at the two key questions on which the different views of power disagree.⁴

First of all, there is the question of how we know that B was affected in a significant manner. While the first view of power would argue that this becomes visible in open conflicts (between A and B), the second view of power would state that conflicts can also be covert which implies that researchers cannot confine themselves to open conflicts but also have to search for more hidden grievances on the part of B. The third view of power would go yet one step further and assert that there are even latent conflicts; from this perspective, the question of whether B was affected in a significant manner can be addressed by showing that, in spite of the absence of both open and covert conflicts, the consequences of A's activities run against the objective interests of B. Regardless of whether they accept open, covert, or latent conflicts as evidence; what all three views of power have in common is, that they essentially ask researchers to identify counterfactuals (i.e. alternative courses of events) and one particularly important source of such counterfactuals are the divergent options that become visible in situations of conflict. Once counterfactuals have been identified, researchers have to point out to what extent some of them would have been more in line with the interests of B than the alternative that materialized in the actual course of events.

The other key question that leads to some disagreement among the three views is: how do we know that it was the actions of A that affected B (i.e. that led to the present state of affairs rather than to one of its counterfactuals)? While all three views of power agree that the answer lies in social mechanisms and that the task of the researcher is to identify the mechanisms that link the activities of A to the consequences felt by B, the three views disagree on the question of what requirements have to be met so that the existence of such a mechanism can be asserted. In particular, the first view of power presupposes that A has

⁴ On the three classic views of power see Lukes 2005. For my interpretation of the research requirements that each view of power gives rise to, see Eckl 2014.

to actively and purposefully affect B, for example by making a coercive threat. The second view of power, on the other hand, would also consider the possibility that B reacts to anticipated demands and that A does not even have to express them. The underlying assumption that also inaction can be seen as a kind of action and hence as an explanatory mechanism is emphasised even more strongly by the third view of power that foregrounds the role of inaction as a way to keep conflicts latent and to avoid the emergence of open conflicts. Unlike the first view of power, the third view of power also assumes that this mechanism does not presuppose intentionality on the part of A.

What the discussion among the three views of power consequently comes down to is that any empirical power analysis in this tradition has to address the challenge of identifying counterfactuals and mechanisms. This requirement is also shared by the fourth view of power but this view is more loosely connected to the other three since it goes beyond them in several important ways.⁵ First of all, the fourth view of power emphasises that it is not always possible to identify a person (or group of persons) A that affected B. Secondly and relatedly, the fourth view of power emphasises that any A is often also a B itself and that there are no privileged persons or groups in society that are not subject to some form of power. What these first two points come down to is the claim that broader societal processes affect a society's members in a significant way and should therefore be interpreted as cases of power. Thirdly, the fourth view of power asserts that it is not always possible (and probably not even necessary) to rank the counterfactuals and to distinguish between those that are in the objective interests of the Bs and those that are not. Thus, from the perspective of the fourth view of power the main task of empirical power analysis is not to circumscribe and specify the relationship between identifiable As and Bs as well as to demonstrate the specific manner in which the Bs are significantly affected; rather, the key challenge is to identify counterfactuals and mechanisms that go beyond common sense expectations. In this

⁵ On the fourth view of power, see Digeser 1992. As mentioned above, the fourth view of power differs in important ways from the other three. For the present purpose, I emphasise, however, the compatibility between all three views. If one wanted to emphasise the differences, one could make the case that it makes more sense to interpret it as a different concept of power.

tradition, “power” serves primarily a sensitizing role that helps the researchers to expand their horizon in order to uncover previously unrecognised effects of power – and these might include such basic notions as “the individual”.⁶

The premisses on which the fourth view of power is based are also relevant for researchers who do not want to go beyond the first three views since the fourth view helps to clarify the other views’ common underlying assumptions – regarding the role of the As in particular but also with a view to the way in which they treat knowledge. The fourth view challenges the others to reflect on the role of knowledge since it takes a clear and explicit position in this regard that expands the realm of power much further than in the other three cases. There are two ways to look at the relationship between power and knowledge, each of which has intriguing implications.

First of all, the fourth view of power sees knowledge as the basis of – or precondition for – power. For example, in the case of coercion and authority (as two central forms of power), the Bs have to know what the As want from them in order to be able to meet their demands.⁷ Even more fundamentally, however, the Bs have to know what different social roles exist, to be able to recognize the role that individual people or groups of people hold, and they have to be aware of the social significance of individual resources in order to understand the ways in which they can be used as power resources. What these considerations come down to is the fact that the fourth view of power treats “power” not only as an explanans but also as an explanandum, thereby drawing attention to its social construction and (re)production.

Secondly, the fourth view of power emphasises that there is no knowledge without power, i.e. it sees power as the basis of knowledge. What is foregrounded here is the fact that in any society knowledge is produced according to specific rules that privilege certain types of knowing and particular kinds of evidence over others – in addition to creating privileged

⁶ On sensitizing concepts, see Blumer 1954.

⁷ For a typology that distinguishes between five forms of power (as explanatory mechanisms), see Eckl 2014.

groups with access to these knowledge production processes and less privileged groups who cannot make their voices heard. From this perspective, it is not so much disagreement that comes as a surprise and has to be explained, rather, it is consensus that has to be explained; as a consequence, researchers are encouraged to reconstruct the social-institutional structures that made consensus possible or imposed it even.

When discussing these two sides of the power-knowledge relationship, the fourth view of power proceeds along the lines just indicated above: it neither assumes that there must always be identifiable As who can be held responsible for the status quo nor does it assume that there would be clearly preferable counterfactuals. Rather, it sensitizes the researcher to the effects of power on knowledge and vice versa. By the same token, the researcher is primarily encouraged to identify counterfactuals and mechanisms, which is seen as a considerable challenge and valued as such – not least since it shows that things could have developed differently. While there are various similarities between the third view of power and the fourth view of power, one could argue that the fourth view of power is even more radical than the third view since it abandons some of the third view's key assumptions and criticizes the positivist tendencies of the third view. On the other hand, the fourth view is less radical in the sense that it abandons the notion of objective (or even real) interests that Lukes himself described as the radical element of his approach.⁸ What both views share, however, is the concern with hidden cases of power, including the power that is embedded in quotidian and consequentially unspectacular practices. The concern with practices is one of the reasons for which several of the issues raised in the discussions among proponents of the four views of power fit particularly well with an ethnographic approach to power analysis.

⁸ Lukes 2005: 38. Lukes refers to the fourth view of power as the ultra-radical one.

3 Practices and the Scope for Ethnography

In my reading, ethnography rests on three pillars: participant observation, interviews, and artefact analysis, each of which contains a bundle of more specific research activities and methods.⁹ While each of these three pillars can make a contribution to a study of practices and their consequences, participant observation is particularly suitable since it allows researchers to observe and experience practices first hand (through their own senses) and to thereby appreciate the temporal and spatial dimension of these practices. This spatio-temporal dimension is of great importance, for example since the sense of urgency and uncertainty that often inheres political processes, gets easily lost when these processes are merely reconstructed retrospectively. Moreover, to study human relations through a practice lens speaks directly to key concerns of power research since it reinforces the point that social order is not simply out there but has to be constantly (re)produced. The accompanying notion of “lived order” suggests that things could be ordered and organized differently which brings us back to the power analysts’ concern with counterfactuals.¹⁰ Even though participant observation is arguably the corner stone of ethnography, the potential of ethnography for the de- and reconstruction of social reality is, however, not limited to participant observation. Quite to the contrary, a strength of ethnography is that it allows for the combination of heterogeneous material across and within its three pillars, rather than constraining itself to a specific type of empirical material.¹¹

For example, researchers can compare their own field notes on a meeting of a policy making body with the official records of that meeting and with the outcome document of that meeting (e.g. a resolution). Through this comparison, researchers will quickly learn which of

⁹ For an introduction to ethnography, see Gobo 2008 and Emerson/Fretz/Shaw 2011.

¹⁰ On “lived order” as well as a discussion of the relationship between ethnography and ethnomethodology, see Pollner/Emerson 2001. For one way to approach the intersection between ethnomethodology and power analysis, see also Allen 2009.

¹¹ One way to integrate heterogeneous material into the research process is to rely on grounded theory in general and its constant comparison method in particular. For an explicit discussion on the compatibility between ethnography and grounded theory, see Charmaz/Mitchell 2001. For introductions to ethnography that draw on grounded theory, see Gobo 2008 and Emerson/Fretz/Shaw 2011.

the aspects that they considered as relevant during their observations did not make it into the official records (and vice versa) and they will see how some of the concerns raised during the meeting become consequential in the form of the outcome document while others fell by the wayside. This comparison of empirical material, in turn, will help researchers to understand how the official records of the meeting reduce the complexity of the actual course of events and how the outcome document serves as the starting point for a new set of social processes (e.g. implementation procedures); most importantly, it becomes visible how both types of documents contribute to the social construction of social order in general and of policy making in particular. Researchers could even go one step further and try to reconstruct the specific practices that produce texts of the genre “official records” or “outcome document” in the first place.

While all four views of power call in principle for the identification of counterfactuals, the degree to which they value ethnographic reconstruction varies. At the risk of slightly oversimplifying things one could put the four views on a continuum where one extreme is occupied by the fourth view and the other extreme by the first view. The fourth view of power would be particularly interested in any insights regarding the potential to organize things differently (counterfactuals) and it would include processes of social (re)production into the domain of potentially relevant social mechanisms that can account for power relations. The first view by contrast, would ask the researcher to identify visible conflicts rather than quotidian and unspectacular background work and would furthermore request the researcher to identify specific As and specific Bs that were involved in the conflict while also demonstrating how the As tried to affect the Bs in significant ways.

These divergent perspectives on the potential value of an ethnographic reconstruction of lived order bring us to a second – but related – strength of ethnography. This second strength is better compatible with the more positivist strands of power analysis but matters from the perspective of the second view of power in particular: by leaving the armchair and by participating in the lives of people, ethnographers are prone to uncover grievances that

would otherwise be overlooked. To be sure, this task can also be achieved by analysing documents and other artefacts but participant observation (and interviews) are especially promising in this regard. This applies in particular if the researcher has access to the backstage areas of political decision-making and is able to participate in private conversations where people might be more willing to admit discontent. It applies also, however, in the case of the aforementioned example: participant observation at the meeting cannot only be used in order to subsequently reflect on the particularities of “official records” and “outcome documents” by comparing them with fieldnotes; it can also be used to systematically trace grievances that did not make it into the text documents.

We can summarize that two features make ethnography promising from the perspective of empirical power analysis: first, participant observation as ethnography’s central methodological pillar and, second, the general openness to include heterogeneous empirical material (a feature that ethnography shares with grounded theory).¹² The specific areas in which ethnography promises to contribute to power analysis are the uncovering of grievances as well as the reconstruction of quotidian practices, which are important for the identification of counterfactuals and mechanisms. While the uncovering of grievances is a classic aspect of power analysis that helps to address the question of whether people (the Bs) were affected in a significant manner, the reconstruction of practices will not always be valued by all views of power. In particular, it is possible that existing practices cannot be linked to specific As that contributed to the establishment and reproduction of these practices; similarly, it might not be possible to demonstrate that alternative lived orders would be in the “objective interests” of the Bs. In such cases, the contribution of ethnography will be primarily valued by proponents of the fourth view of power that sees the identification of marginalized alternatives and the unearthing of forgotten options as an end in itself.

¹² See footnote 11 on the complementarity of ethnography and grounded theory.

4 Doing Empirical Power Analysis

The previous section discussed the way in which ethnography can help to address typical aspects of power analysis. In order to avoid any misunderstanding, this discussion has to be complemented with a brief comment on how I view the relationship between history and ethnography since both of them played and still play an important role in my own research, which will be used for the purpose of illustration in the following. From my perspective, a historically minded and an ethnographically minded approach to empirical power analysis are highly compatible. Actually, they are not just compatible but even complementary since participant observation as ethnography's central pillar relies strongly on synchronic comparison whereas historical analysis relies primarily on diachronic comparison and draws heavily on ethnography's other two pillars: on artefact analysis in particular (e.g. historical documents) but sometimes also on interviews (e.g. oral history). Put differently, the complementarity of history and ethnography becomes self-evident if these two approaches are interpreted as synchronic participant observation and as diachronic document analysis. From the perspective of empirical power analysis they simply represent two complementary sources for the identification of counterfactuals and mechanisms.

Drawing on three articles I have written, this section will illustrate the following points. First of all, it will show that even though there are typical aspects that are addressed in power analysis, not all of them can be dealt with in an individual article: obviously, there are spatial constraints that make it necessary to focus the analysis at the expense of certain aspects; moreover, as discussed above, there are some long-standing disagreements between the different views of power and some of them require researchers to set priorities and to position themselves, which also means that some aspects of power analysis cannot be dealt with simultaneously. Secondly, this section will illustrate, what kind of insights can be gained and what challenges researchers face, when they engage in a power analysis along the lines described in the preceding pages. Finally, the section will exemplify the seamless complementarity between ethnography and history – or rather between participant observation and the analysis of historical documents – that was just discussed.

Unlike the articles that will be discussed below, the article “The Power of Private Foundations: Rockefeller and Gates in the Struggle against Malaria” is purely based on the analysis of documents (Eckl 2014). The article “investigates the rationale that informs the global engagement of private foundations and addresses the question of to what extent and in what way they have the power to (autonomously) shape global social and health policy in line with their convictions even when others disagree or could be expected to disagree” (Eckl 2014: 91). In addition to the introduction and the conclusion, the article comprises three sections: the first section discusses conceptual-theoretical issues in the study of power, the second section discusses the case of the Rockefeller Foundation, and the third section discusses the Gates Foundation (in comparison to the Rockefeller Foundation). The article is theory-driven in the sense that the conceptual-theoretical section develops various expectations and sub-questions that are addressed in the empirical part. The conceptual-theoretical section discusses typical aspects of power analysis (including the sources of the counterfactuals) but it sets also priorities and expands upon the typical aspects of power analysis. For the present purpose, the following points are particularly noteworthy.

First of all, the predominant concept of power that was also referred to above is described as the notion that power is about overcoming resistance; this concept of power is expanded to a dual concept of power that also includes the notion of bypassing resistance.¹³ In this context the article argues furthermore that power is not just about affecting others (in significant ways) but also about effectuating something oneself. Secondly, since the article focuses on the power of private foundations (that play the part of the As), the article limits its discussion of views of power to the first three views, all of which work with the assumption that there should be identifiable As. However, the second and the third view of power are interpreted in a manner that acknowledges the relevance of the fact that the As’ (in)actions contribute also to the (re)production of social reality – including societal biases. As a consequence of its moving the As to the centre of attention, the article has to deal with a third particularity, namely the fact that it becomes relevant to know what the As actually

¹³ On different concepts of power, see also footnote 3.

want. While the classic discussions on the different views of power were concerned with the consequences on the Bs, the article also wants to know if the As reach their self-set goals. As a consequence, each of the empirical sections discusses the goals that the As set themselves.

The complementary and simultaneously difficult relationship between the different views of power becomes also visible in the way in which the article deals with the issue of mechanisms. On the one hand, the article develops five generic forms of power which can be seen as an abstract set of mechanisms that link the (in)activities of the As to policy outcomes: coercion, authority, force, manipulation, and bypassing. In the empirical sections, these abstract mechanisms are filled with detail and they are complemented with more specific inductively derived mechanisms. For example, the empirical analysis shows how the monetary resources of the As' can be used as positive sanctions and consequently as the basis of coercion; moreover, the As tend to rely on the specific mechanism of leverage in order to mobilize more resources in total than they contributed. The empirical analysis shows also that the long-term engagement of the As in malaria control made it possible to develop the basis for a second form of power, namely authority, and that one of the more specific mechanisms that was at work here was the conduct of demonstration projects (or field trials) that "proved" the superiority of interventions that had been proposed by the As. The role of these demonstration projects can be used to show how the analysis blurred into areas that are of interest from the perspective of the fourth view of power as well since they address the power-knowledge relationship: by conducting the field trials, the As reproduced certain practices of knowledge production that are not available to everyone and they reproduced the biases of the underlying perspective on malaria control that values the easily discernible short-term consequences of technical-biomedical interventions against malaria more than long term social change that many others view as a precondition for malaria control.

The role of social mechanisms beyond formal political decision-making is discussed even more explicitly in the article "The Social Lives of Global Policies against Malaria: Conceptual Considerations, Past Experiences, and Current Issues" (Eckl 2017a). The article takes its

starting point in some puzzling observations that I made before, during, and after a meeting of the Roll Back Malaria (RBM) Partnership Board in May 2015. In this case, participant observation played a key role since the conflictual dimension of the meeting could not have been derived from the official accounts of the meeting that glossed over them completely. While the insights generated via participant observation provide the indispensable starting point of the article and while subsequent participant observation contributed to the analysis in the concluding section of the article, the analysis of historical documents played an equally indispensable part since the overall goal of the article is to interpret the initial observations in light of patterns that emerged in the history of malaria control before asking what direction malaria control is likely to take in the next years.

In terms of the underlying power analysis, the article pays even more tribute to the concerns of the fourth view of power than the previous article. Counterfactuals and mechanisms are actually at the centre of attention and power is treated both as an explanandum and an explanans. As the term “social lives” in the title indicates, the article is particularly interested in the fact that policies can take on a life of their own and is less preoccupied with the role of specific As even though the role of foundations and other actors is alluded to also here. Similarly, the kind of mechanisms studied are not so much the classic generic forms of power but broader social mechanisms including the aforementioned arbitration via field trials.

As discussed above, the fourth view of power has a tendency to radically expand the realm of power analysis and to thereby blur the boundary between power-related and other social phenomena. The effects of this boundary stretching have also had an impact on the article. While the article draws on typical aspects of power analysis, the term power is barely mentioned in the text while the notion of social mechanism plays a much more prominent role. From my perspective, however, the question is not so much if a text is labelled as “power analysis”, or not, or whether a text is organised around the term “power”, or not. The question is rather if enough typical aspects of power analysis are visibly touched upon; if this is the case, a text can still be part of the power-analysis family even though it is not labelled as such.

The third and final article that I would like to discuss briefly in this context is an important case in point since power is even less explicitly discussed therein. As the title suggests, the article “Successful Governance Reform and Its Consequences: How the Historical Drive for Shorter Meetings and More Time Efficiency Reverberates in Contemporary World Health Assemblies” deals with reforms that have transformed the World Health Assembly (WHA, or Assembly) as the central decision-making body of the World Health Organization (WHO) (Eckl 2017b). Similar to the previous article, this article starts with puzzling observations during field research and draws on the analysis of historical documents in order to put them into a broader context. Overall, the article addresses the following interrelated questions: “What characterises the temporal organisation of the WHA, how did it develop historically, and what consequences follow from it under contemporary conditions?” (Eckl 2017b: 41)

Out of the three articles discussed here, it is the most inductive one. It does not start with any expectations derived from the literature while the broader methodological and conceptual-theoretical perspective is briefly referred to in the introduction and while the findings are related to existing literature in the two final sections. The article deals with the practical challenges that the delegates who participate at WHAs face and focuses on time pressure and parallel processes in particular. The central source of counterfactuals are previous reforms of WHA governance during which both the rules of procedure and/or the practices of conducting the meetings were changed. While governance reform is the key mechanism behind these changes, the article is interested both in the intended and in the unintended consequences of these changes. Moreover, the article emphasises that the changes affected the WHA as a whole and in this sense all delegations. While the article also raises the issue that certain changes affected some delegations more than others, in particular since delegations vary in size and smaller ones suffer even more from parallel processes than larger ones, the dominant theme are the shared challenges. By the same token, the article foregrounds that the changes in rules were self-set and that the As are also the Bs.

Similar to the previous article's interest in the "social lives of policies", the article stands consequently in the traditions of those power analysts who are sceptical of the idea that there are clearly identifiable As that are continuously able to get what they want and that they affect the Bs in a manner that runs against their objective interest; rather, the article investigates the omnipresent unintended consequences that even those reforms have that seem to achieve their self-set goals and it foregrounds the related paradoxical effects of such successful reforms – including their self-perpetuating character. The underlying attitude is certainly closer to the fourth view of power than to the first one but since it draws still on typical elements of power analysis, power is from my perspective not absent.

Interestingly, however, one of the criticisms in the peer-review process was that the article was somewhat power blind, in particular since, according to one reviewer, it did not account for the fact that it was, as the reviewer surmised, the rich countries in particular who wanted these reforms; according to the reviewer, this was done in order to weaken WHO – just as they tried to weaken other international organizations that were strongly influenced by developing countries. Other changes that were introduced in the course of the review process notwithstanding, the article did not incorporate the suggestion to narrate the story of WHA reform through the lens of a clear cut North-South divide as the reviewer had essentially suggested. One of the reasons for which I had not started with it in the first place was probably that I am generally sceptical to simply assume the existence of such a divide (Eckl/Weber 2007); moreover, the reform discussions started right after the creation of the WHO and pre-dated the 1970s and 1980s during which the conflict within the United Nations between the developed and the developing countries was arguably at its peak; a more pragmatic reason for not incorporating the suggested changes was certainly that there was no room to integrate such a discussion and that the whole research design of the article would have had to be changed in order to systematically trace what countries had supported what reform proposal in the course of the WHA's seven decades of existence.

What matters most for the purpose of the present discussion, however, is the question of to what extent the tension between the different views of power can be resolved within an individual text – in particular if we are talking about an article-length text – or not. In light of

the three articles just discussed, my preliminary answer would be that it is necessary to focus on one of the ends of the continuum while it is simultaneously possible to try to address some of the concerns of the other end. Puristic analysts, however, will not be satisfied by this approach and the intriguing insight is that even though most power analysts are linked to one another via the elements that their analyses share, they might nevertheless accuse each other of power blindness. In other words, while I am still convinced that the article as it stands makes an important contribution to discussions on WHO reform and speaks to research on power, I also believe that the reviewer rose an important question and I would be very interested in reading a text that retold the story through a North-South lens and discussed the extent to which one group of states continuously won over the other.

Regarding substantive findings of the article that speak to research on power, I would like to highlight the following point in particular. The article provides an interesting explanation for the apparent consensus at the WHA, namely time pressure. The general time pressure under which the WHA operates has furthered a multitude of time-saving practices (social mechanisms) many of which come down to the goal of reaching agreement before the actual meeting takes place in order to avoid lengthy and hence time-consuming discussions. These activities take multiple forms. On the one hand there are other official decision-making fora in the WHO's annual policy cycle that try to resolve disagreements beforehand; on the other hand, there are various informal formats either in the months between the meetings of the key governance bodies, right before these meetings or at the margins and in parallel to these meetings. From the perspective of power analysis, these practices are of key interest since they make conflicts less visible if not invisible; this makes it difficult to reconstruct the ways in which power was at work and it excludes visible conflicts as a source of counterfactuals.

5 Conclusion

As discussed in the introduction, it does not take a social scientist to appreciate the omnipresence of power. What this paper showed, however, is that within the social sciences there is a rich tradition of power analysis that provides the necessary tools to analyse power

systematically rather than in an ad-hoc manner. By drawing on this tradition, researchers are also enabled to reflect on their own work and to see the challenges and limits of power research. From a methodological perspective, the paper showed furthermore that participant observation and document analysis can help researchers to address the requirements of empirical power analysis that have been identified by proponents of the four different views of power.

Three Big Words (*Manáira Assunção*)

1 Introduction

Power, knowledge and practices are three big words that standing alone can mean a lot of things and standing together do even more so. These three concepts are fundamentally contested in the academic literature and there are various forms of usage in scientific research. As analytical concepts power, knowledge and practices are embedded in different research traditions and observation methods, which relate to ontological, epistemological and methodological differences in approaches. Specifically with regards to ‘power’, as Eckl argues, “the long-standing disagreements between the different views of power urge researchers to position themselves” (p. 8). This is particularly the case for social science research on politics. In terms of methodological considerations the puzzling element in qualitative approaches towards power, knowledge and practices which make use of inductive and iterative reasoning is on one hand how to gather, verify and analyse relevant data that reflects exactly the elements of power the research was intended to portray in the first place. This is particularly true in cases where the concern is with the “hidden” elements of power, as Eckl states, or the micro layers of power. On the other hand, the definition of a problem (research question) and the proposition of a solution to that problem or a standing hypothesis (expected result), ultimately speaks for the researcher’s “positionality”, his/her motivation and what is identified as having to be met in order to qualify as a relationship permeated by power.

This discussion paper outlines possibilities for the analysis of power, knowledge and practices in social science research through practical step-by-step considerations about two methods in particular: participant observation and narrative inquiry. The paper proceeds with an analytical discussion on power, knowledge and practices applying them to the doctoral project entitled “*Domestic Health Experts and Policies: Shaping South-South*

cooperation of Brazil, India and China in Mozambique". This research aims to identify the Brazilian, Indian and Chinese experts involved in South-South cooperation (SSC) initiatives, their knowledge about health development and the relations they have established with their counterparts in Mozambique. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates the parallels existing with Eckl's research¹⁴, mainly about the ways both studies address power. The third part focuses on the use of narrative inquiry to assess expertise and knowledge, while dialoguing with Eckl's account on strengths and weaknesses of the methods employed. Sections four and five highlight methodological challenges, identified in the context of the doctoral project, and which might be relevant for social scientists using an inductive and iterative approach.

Eckl presents and discusses "the pool of elements that links different kinds of empirical power analysis" (p. 2) based on Barnett and Duvall's taxonomy of power according to which there are four types or views of power – compulsory, institutional, structural and productive. This taxonomy is based on two analytical dimensions: "the kinds of social relations through which power works and the specificity of social relations through which effects are produced"¹⁵ (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 42). However, the taxonomy faces an important dilemma:

"[T]rying to keep a certain conceptual coherence despite lacking neutrality, a slightly different task consists in presupposing that the different usages have a common core, which does not necessarily imply a full-fledged taxonomic definition, or even a neutral one" (Guzzini 2005: 502).

¹⁴ For the purpose of this discussion paper, Julian Eckl (Universität Hamburg) provided an input paper, which in turn builds on three previous publications: "The Power of Private Foundations: Rockefeller and Gates in the Struggle against Malaria", *Global Social Policy* 14, 1 (2014): 91-116; "The Social Lives of Global Policies against Malaria: Conceptual Considerations, Past Experiences, and Current Issues", *Medical Anthropology* 36, (2017a); "Successful Governance Reform and Its Consequences: How the Historical Drive for Shorter Meetings and More Time Efficiency Reverberates in Contemporary World Health Assemblies", in: *Global Health Governance* 11, 1 (2017b): 40-56.

¹⁵ In this sense, power can be seen as a phenomena and an explanation for a phenomena – power as explanandum and explanans (Eckl, p. 11).

This means that concepts cannot be neutral specifically because the choice(s) made between the multiplicity of approaches for power analysis has by itself a (political and powerful) impact: while establishing ideas of effective cause, one politicises certain issues because one creates justifications and categorisations about issues which demand political action and issues which do not (Guzzini 2005: 497; 508). Thus, as Eckl argues, “the link between politics and power is self-evident” (p. 2). Assessing ‘power’ is still a matter of interpretation based on the conditions the researcher identifies as having to be met in order to qualify as a relationship permeated by power. These interpretations result in a mix of shared assumptions and divergent interpretations in the social sciences and ultimately different views emerge upon what qualifies as valid evidence (Eckl, p. 3-4). Establishing what is (and what is not) ‘valid evidence’ might be the best way to explain the power-knowledge nexus within our discipline of Political Science or International Relations (also as competing fields of knowledge).

Besides the debate about how power is dealt with within disciplines and the subsequent conceptual analysis, power permeates the topic of the PRIMO programme relating to the observed power shifts in the international arena with the rise of regional powers, and the emergence of the BRICS, for example. These actors, their behaviours and relations have been understood as a group of emerging countries which are challenging old power structures and the centrality of the old powers, namely the US and Europe. This understanding has been supported by different explanatory accounts about (economic) resources, foreign policy, (Southern) identity politics etc. Once again the meaning of power – identifying what does power do, what it means and how it became to mean and be able to do what it does – is always embedded in a theoretical context (Guzzini 2005). Eckl and the doctoral research seem to place emphasis on the questions of taken-for-granted and ‘naturalised’ legitimisation processes under which power is operationalised. The three articles Eckl discusses focus on power of private foundations in shaping global health policy (2014); on knowledge and solution providers, and social mechanisms for constructing global malaria policies (2017a); and on the organizational practices of the World Health Assembly (WHA) (2017b). Thus, all

three articles aim to expand upon the typical aspects of power analysis, in large by creating an understanding in which ways practices – also encompassing knowledge production – contribute to the (re)production of social reality (p.9).

2 Reading Power through Micro Layers: Experts, Knowledge and Practices

According to Guzzini (2005: 508) “most recent power approaches (...) tend to add Foucault (or Bourdieu) to Luke’s three dimensions of power¹⁶”. The doctoral research builds on Bourdieu’s field theory according to which the international development cooperation field can be conceptualised as a social space structured around agents’ positions, namely of bilateral and multilateral agencies specialized in the promotion of international development, comprising a hierarchical field with dominant taxonomies, such as the division between donor and recipient. This field has been monopolized by some actors, such as the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD, prescribing what is (and what is not) official development assistance (ODA). South-South cooperation (SSC)¹⁷ is seen to disrupt the internal logic of the field¹⁸ breaking with the dominant aid logic, at least symbolically, in which Southern providers “highlight the differences between traditional ODA and SSC and establish new positions within the international development cooperation field” (Esteves and Assunção 2014: 1782). In this case of power analysis the researcher would show how the (power) positions within the field are shifting due to changes in the distribution of

¹⁶ Luke’s three dimensions of power are outlined by Eckl (2014: 94).

¹⁷ SSC refers to development cooperation in the political, economic, social, cultural, environmental and technical domains provided by one developing country to another developing country or a form of collaboration among countries of the South (UNDP’s definition).

¹⁸ Southern providers are seen as disruptive to the rules of the game established by the DAC, because they represent a “hybrid” category of actors, offering development cooperation but in many cases still relying on international aid themselves; therefore disturbing previous taxonomies and categorisations such as donor and recipient. Additionally, SSC providers claim to operate with different practices while criticise the asymmetries between donors and recipients in North-South cooperation (NSC) (Chin and Quadir 2012; Mawdsley 2012).

competencies and various kinds of capital¹⁹; particularly the symbolic capital that SSC providers hold, and the difficulty of the donor community to legitimise itself. Similarly, Eckl (2017a: 3) affirms “the ‘malaria community’ is time and again in disagreement but also has a strong tendency to downplay internal conflicts”, indicates how important the maintenance of the *rules of the game* – which enables the agents to establish consensus such as the ODA definition – is intimately linked to questions of authority and legitimacy.

With regards to the analysis of micro-processes of policy making, power “is embedded in quotidian and consequentially unspectacular practices (...) (which) are of key interest since they make conflicts less visible if not invisible” (p. 5). Eckl sees practices, for example, as informing and resulting in the rules of procedure within an organization. These practices are reiterated in resolutions, background documents and the procedures for plenary meetings/discussions (2017b). At the same time, he discusses the reproduction of certain practices of knowledge production in the context of malaria policy (2014). The doctoral research addresses knowledge as a set of practices, relating to the ideas and models of development policy which became institutionalised by development agencies since the 1950s 1960s. These agencies hold power over knowledge production and dissemination that in turn inform and legitimise development interventions. These agencies’ authority increased through notions of professionalization (Kothari, 2005: 431), which again were made possible through the institutionalisation of certain [educational] practices. The (re)production and legitimation of these practices lead to the formulation of universalised *one-size-fits-all* models, in which development seemed to encompass a technical matter rather than a political one. By offering ‘technical’ solutions for development, the international development expert retains and exercises power because it is precisely this expert who possesses the technical expertise to deal with the problem of development.

¹⁹ According to Bourdieu (1993), the different types and subtypes of capital represent a set of constraints of the structure of the social world, which govern its functioning in terms of chances of success for practices. Capitals are produced and socially distributed, they are an individual’s resource and they provide power to act. In the field of international development cooperation, economic (ODA disbursed), social (bureaucratic apparatus) and symbolic capital (moral dimension) are mainly at work.

Similarly, Eckl (2017a: 3) describes how expert solutions are socially negotiated, but mainly how solutions are developed which seem consensual, universally applicable, technically feasible and morally desirable in order to maintain a particular strategy of malaria control.

The link between experts, knowledge and practices is present in the investigation about the experts from Brazil, India and China who deploy SSC projects in health in Mozambique. The research is interested in the type of knowledge – experts’ views about problems and solutions for health development – mobilised and transferred in the context of SSC²⁰. The puzzling feature about the actors participating in SSC is that they “are considered to be most appropriate actors to share their solutions and address domestic development problems with other countries” (De Bruyn 2013: 20). The experts from the South allegedly hold the distinguishing feature of sharing similar conditions to other aid recipient countries, having dealt with equivalent development challenges at the domestic level, a feature that the traditional development expert does not share²¹. This is how countries like Brazil, India and China justify their entrance into the international development cooperation field.

But why undertake such a study? The literature on SSC has focused on the common theme of explaining why SSC providers are “different” (or not) from traditional donors and North-South cooperation and in which ways they might prove more effective for development cooperation (or not). Placing emphasis on the perspectives of the agents at the implementing end of SSC projects can help to address: firstly, if and how these actors are embedded in their prior domestic development experiences and, secondly, if this ‘knowledge’ about development is distinct to the one offered by traditional donors and development assistance in health (DAH). The analysis contributes to the debate on experts, and the production, the

²⁰ SSC is based on the idea of knowledge exchange or transfer of solutions inspired by Southern providers’ own experiences (Castro 2014: 88). This exchange is usually linked to the modality of technical cooperation which is “executed through the provision of expertise, education and training, consultancies and, occasionally the donation of equipment” (Cabral and Weinstock 2010:2).

²¹ The hypothesis is based on research conducted by the BRICS Policy Center, where is argued that SSC actors are embedded in domestic expert communities which have designed and implemented policies in their own countries. In place of development experts, implementing agents in SSC in health, for example, are civil servants, which have actively participated in building their national health systems at home.

consumption and the transmission of knowledge in international development, as well as, to the investigation of the hidden aspects of power – the authority positions that affect the visions about development that are heard and the ones that have been silenced – discussed in this working paper. As qualitative researchers we want to:

“[...] develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study. This involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges. Researchers are bound not to tight cause-and-effect relationships among factors, but rather by identifying the complex interactions of factors in any situation” (Creswell 2007: 47).

But how can we do this? Particularly in these instances in which power disputes are less visible if not invisible making it “difficult to reconstruct the ways in which power was at work” (p. 13). It is recognized that even in cases where “the use of power is transparent” – amongst knowledge holders and knowledge consumers, for example – “it is far from straightforward to examine” (Lewis 2006: 2125-2126). The next section shows how expertise and knowledge can be assessed through narrative inquiry and outlines parallel with Eckl’s methodology, particularly with regards to the co-constitution of problems, solutions and solution providers in a particular field (i.e. global health or development cooperation).

3 What Narrative Inquiry Can Tell Us About Expertise and Knowledge?

From the perspective of which type of knowledge is deemed relevant for the promotion of international development, there is a clear relation and direction between knowledge producers and consumers: “the transfer of knowledge from the North to the South is at the core of the development process (Parpart 1995: 222). However, “(t)he idea that developing countries have no expertise not only because their knowledge and experiences have been devaluated, but because the very notion of expertise is socially, culturally and geographically

informed” (Kothari 2005: 429)²². The puzzle that emerges for this PhD is what it means when knowledge and domestic policy experiences are transferred from the South to the South, from one developing country to another. From a power analysis perspective, it is important to inquire if power relations will be different when compared to the power dynamics created between mainstream development agencies, their foreign experts and the local recipient government, institutions and affected people; and therefore if the ‘development intervention’ will have other effects, i.e. adopting a different health strategy than within traditional development assistance in health. So, how to address these research inquiries methodologically? One way is to emphasise “the interconnectedness and co-constitution of problems, solutions, and solution providers” (Eckl 2017a: 4), which speaks to the field of development and health interventions equally²³.

“[I]f a particular solution is accepted as *the* solution, the concomitant understanding of ‘why malaria is a problem’ is emphasized at the expense of alternative ones; some solution providers will become key and other irrelevant. A central implication of these considerations is that the power that individual actors display in the policy-making process is not to be taken as given, but can be reconstructed from the particular dependencies and prerogatives that a specific interpretation of the malaria problem gives rise to” (ibid).

The doctoral investigation will have to identify how experts from the South, namely from Brazil, India and China, interpret ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ and formulate strategies towards their own health systems vis-à-vis how they do this in the context of the health projects in Mozambique. The combination of heterogeneous material is useful to address the

²² Eckl also refers to the issue of which knowledge is deemed relevant and which knowledge is devaluated. This is done through the (re)production of certain practices of knowledge production that are not available to everyone and enable these actors to value certain intervention approaches while declassifying others (p.10). In one of his articles, Eckl (2014) discusses authority and knowledge production in relation to the private foundations and their power to shape global social and health policy through means of promoting their vision of social and health problems while downplaying other alternative policy prescriptions.

²³ Similarly Leander and Aalberts (2013) have addressed the co-constitutive processes through which the expert and the object of expertise are said to generate each other simultaneously.

interpretation of ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ of the actors under study. One way to do this is using ethnographic methods. Particularly participant observation – entailing both “being physically present at the relevant sites and engaging in email exchanges and telephone conversations with ‘the field’” (Eckl 2017a: 12) – has the advantage of disclosing struggles and disputes, which are not revealed in official documents (p. 7). In his study about malaria policy, Eckl visited what he refers to as ‘sites of global malaria policy-making’ (Eckl 2017a: 2-3); for the PhD research this would mean going to the actual project sites²⁴.

In a second step, Eckl (ibid) reviewed a heuristic tool he developed in earlier studies, and matched historical documents with participant observation in order to identify the recurrent tensions and social mechanisms that have shaped global malaria policies. This procedure – participant observation and relying on historical documents as well as creating a heuristic tool²⁵ could also be useful in the context of the PhD to locate the experts’ experiences with health reform efforts in Brazil, India and China, i.e. identifying the past experiences in health development SSC providers hold and match these with current project implementation practices in Mozambique.

But still questions remain: how to assess the knowledge claims of SSC providers? How to provide structured and systematic evidence about their prior domestic experiences and the linkages to the development cooperation projects they are pursuing abroad? Furthermore, how to incorporate different visions about knowledge and experience within this highly heterogeneous group of Southern providers²⁶, in which Brazilian development cooperation should be differentiated from Chinese development cooperation, for example? Being

²⁴ Since there are no specific agencies or ministries, which develop general and sectoral (health) development cooperation policies or strategies within Brazil, India and China on a regular basis such as is the case of DAC-donors.

²⁵ One idea is to use the concept of “iron triangle” in health, which addresses efficiency/cost containment (cost angle), high quality care (quality angle), and patient access (access angle) (Burns 2014: 3). Depending on the views expressed by the experts throughout interviews it would be possible to allocate their inclination along one line of the triangle, i.e. inclination towards cost and access angle, or another.

²⁶ SSC entails a wide gamut of actors, driven by a complex set of forces and motivations, with highly heterogeneous practices (Renzi and Seifert 2014).

interested in 1) the professional trajectories of the actors involved in SSC (their prior domestic experiences and how their international careers began); and 2) the meanings these actors attribute to health ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ (their frameworks for health and the strategies they support for health development), the doctoral project choose to take narratives as interpretative research method. The narrative accounts of the professionals involved in SSC projects²⁷ will help to make sense of the meanings and organise information about how these actors have interpreted events – such as suddenly working in Mozambique – and the values, beliefs and experiences that guide those interpretations. It is based on the literature about actor-oriented approaches that examine the work of development agencies ethnographically (see Mosse 2011; Mosse and Lewis 2006; De Sardan 2005; Long 2001), while placing emphasis on the ways in which health and development meanings are produced and negotiated. It serves to inquire networks of relations (formal and informal) between actors and institutions, while simultaneously exploring how actors manage contradictions and contested meanings.

During fieldwork in Mozambique, qualitative interviews with relevant stakeholders from Brazil, India, China and Mozambique were conducted following the snowball principle. The individual’s participant experiences are the general strategy for data gathering and through which multiple types of information emerge (stories as “field texts”) (Creswell 2007: 55-57)²⁸. The task now entails selecting the individuals to gather further information about. With regards to the experiences with national health systems these experts claim to have, Eckl’s notion of diachronic snowballing to detect the starting point for reform debates within the WHA/WHO (2017b: 43) might be interesting to pursue. In the interviews the question of which reform efforts the expert considers relevant in his/her domestic context was addressed. Nevertheless, these health reforms and strategies within official documents and government statements, mainly reports from the Ministries of Health of the three selected

²⁷ Confined to the universe of Brazilian, Indian and Chinese experts working on health projects in Mozambique.

²⁸ Addressing three issues: (1) actors, activities and relations in Mozambique; (2) domestic policy experiences in health (historical professional experience and views of health); (3) translation of experience in SSC knowledge exchange.

countries, will have to be documented. Finally, there is the exercise of 'restory', entailing the reorganization of the stories into some general type of framework that provides a link among ideas²⁹. The objective is to create a description of themes that hold across stories and eventually build a taxonomy of types of stories³⁰ through an analysis of narratives (Creswell 2007: 54).

Why does narrative inquiry seem to be a useful method? Narrative inquiry aims at describing and interpreting interviewees' perspectives while creating and understanding of the dynamic processes and interactions. Because narrative analysis can uncover nuances and details of previous experiences, it offers the possibility to study SSC providers as single individuals. At the same time, it might provide tools to identify a set of concepts and practices that captures actors' perceptions and underline the ways in which those actors understand the role of their projects and implementing agencies in promoting development in partner countries. Therefore, instead of departing from a pre-established set of definitions or building mainly on academic literature, the starting point would require a set of observations and particular experiences in order to move to a generalised pattern of explanation (inductive approach) based on what participants communicate about national health systems and reforms, and SSC projects in Mozambique. The possibility of going back-and-forth in the data – always reflecting upon the original data and assure an accurate account of participants' views – entails one advantage of narrative inquiry. Another aspect is that it represents a flexible, case and theme based methodology, which can produce a frame that guides the analysis. This also helps to determine differences in knowledge about the topic, seeking for different points of views and experiences amongst experts (Kawulich 2005: 12).

²⁹ In addition, this general framework will have to reflect dichotomies, disruptions and contradictions, as well as important turning points in which the story line changes direction dramatically - what Czarniawska (2004) conceptualises as the deconstruction of the stories.

³⁰ It is important to note that at the same time I am doing cross-cases analysis: the selection of cases – Brazil, India and China – should provide comparison between them: firstly, by identifying issues within each case (analysis of themes) and then looking for common themes (cross-case analysis). The case selection is based on the expectations about their information content, because they are expected to provide variations and/or deviations in perspectives. I will have to establish boundaries of the cases (time, events, and processes).

How this links back to power analysis? The research expects to find competing visions about health development and different ways on how these meanings are negotiated amongst actors. Moreover, the study could contribute to identify if there is a stable narrative about SSC, which relates to the symbolic power SSC provider hold in the international development cooperation field. Having outlined the research method, the last part of this discussion paper addresses the challenges either identified at the beginning of the doctoral research or encountered during fieldwork. It also lays out questions that remain open with regards to ethnographic methods and participant observation in particular.

4 Two “Is” – Inductive and Iterative – and Many Challenges

First of all, the challenge with inductive research is to maintain openness towards the research question(s) and the theoretical and methodological approaches employed. Generally not having a working hypothesis or wanting to predict something, inductive researchers rather aim to observe something puzzling or “uncover” issues that have been taken for granted. They then proceed to describe their ‘discovery’ and/or explain it in detail. However, inductive researchers have to make sure that they do not lose focus, since they might be going-back and forth between their research questions/design, the data collected and the approach(es) chosen for analysis. In this sense in exploratory research there is the constant task of revising and refining, considering follow-up questions and issues to pursue gathering new information. In one of his articles, for example, Eckl (2017a:41) first gathered material through participant observation, then underwent document analysis and finally returned to the insights gained from participant observation. Here once again, the strength and complementarity of these two methods – participant observation and historical document analysis – is highlighted. Particularly, participant observation has the unique advantage of observing and of experiencing practices first hand (p. 6).

Nevertheless, participant observation is still a highly difficult task and Eckl’s contribution could clarify how to proceed in each of the steps, ranging from getting access to one’s ‘field’

and finalizing one's field notes. The difference between merely observing and actively participating while observing might be self-explanatory. How much the researcher is supposed to engage in activities is said to be dependent on the objectives and design of the specific project and on the circumstance in which the researcher is (Kawulich 2005: 6). Thus, there is no general formula to it. But how to avoid excessive subjectivity when presenting the account, how to distinguish between necessary and unnecessary information and analysis is still puzzling. In this context, I would argue that participant observation's major challenge is the difficulty of documenting data and the subjective exercise that it entails: how to report and describe instead of only interpreting with personal biases?

Also, in narrative inquiry a researcher has to deal with many dilemmas, especially an inexperienced one. It is an emergent design and is especially time-consuming because the scientist has to interrogate its own research question over and over again. At the same time you have to confront yourself with the question of "who owns the story?" who are the actors that can tell it and which version is convincing; "what happens when narratives compete?" (Creswell 2007: 57). Concomitantly, questions arise as how to make sense of different kinds of 'knowing' and how to represent [expert] knowledge 'systems'? This process involves interpretation: if the researcher relies on qualitative interviews, in the process of transcribing those interviews inevitably he/she will interpret participants' accounts (Riessman 2008: 23). Additionally, the issue of power is present here as well: "narrative researchers need to create an atmosphere that fosters 'reciprocal and empowering interaction'" (ibid: 41). However, the research presented here is dealing with a group of experts (elite interviews), they fit into a category of subjects that are more powerful than the researcher. What are the peculiarities for dealing with experts and the knowledge they hold? Moreover and of major importance in narrative inquiry, the researcher will rely heavily on authenticity of participants' accounts and their goodwill. How to deal with the issue if we doubt this authenticity? Specially because "it is rare that a story comes out in a linear format

[and] the very act of introducing one logistical inconsistency into [a] story makes the researcher cast doubt on the entire narrative” (Flicker 2004: 531; 533)³¹.

Considering the questions above, there are three major challenges that have to be reflected upon when conducting inductive and iterative research. First of all, there is the issue of access and having a key informant or not. This heavily depends on the researcher’s prior relations with influential insiders and might be easier for an experienced researcher, who is recognised by the group, or institution he/she is studying. Secondly, there is the issue of positionality: although the researcher should constantly try to engage in the discovery instead of confirming something he/she already knows, he/she cannot separate himself or herself from background, history, context and prior understandings (Creswell 2007: 39). From the beginning of the research project, one has to identify one’s position and this reflection has to be maintained throughout the investigation. It can be addressed when justifying one’s case and theme selection ³². And finally, the problems related to representation of events and subsequent interpretation. Kawulich (2005: 12) calls attention to the fact that researchers may be inclined to select informants who mostly agree with the researchers’ own views and opinions. Furthermore, it is difficult to assess whether one has correctly understood the participant and in as much the information gathered is transferrable or representative for more than one individual and to which extent it is generalisable. One way, but which should not be underestimated and has important implications for the continuation of one’s research, is to undergo a validation process with the interviewees and inquire if the researcher has correctly captured participants’ views.

5 Two “Is” and the Power of Researcher Motivation

This working paper discussed ways of approaching “power”, “knowledge” and “practices” methodologically in social science research. Despite the self-evident nature and relationship

³¹ For a debate on implausible narratives see Flicker (2004).

³² On both issues access and positionality see Eckl (2017: 1).

between power and knowledge, for example, the various layers to be extracted when conducting power analysis underscore the difficulty in choosing wisely one's method(s) and in effectively assessing one's data. In qualitative research designs that support an inductive and an iterative approach it is imperative to maintain an open, critical at the same time focussed relation to one's research question, design and the data collected. It is a balancing act of filtering and identifying what matters to the research's overall objective, and if and how these might have changed during the course of the research activity.

A last issue to add is the question of counterfactuals: in an inductive approach, the researcher would not necessarily presuppose causal inference or path dependency. How can we address the idea of "it could have been done otherwise"? It does not seem to mean the direct opposite of an event in this context or even the reversal of power relations; it might refer to a process or social mechanism that can have been dealt with differently. Does it mean presenting the pool of policy alternatives that are out there? Eckl (2014: 94) derives policy alternatives from a historical analysis (temporal axis) and national developments (spatial axis) – comparing these to the global agenda (either they go into the same direction or differ from this agenda). Historical comparisons would be a central way to develop counterfactuals with regards to power analysis (ibid: 113). But how exactly do we provide for counterfactuals and understand their implications when doing a historical analysis?³³

From the perspective of power, knowledge and practices, these actor-oriented approaches or micro-level analyses are often criticised for neglecting structural forces resulting in an incomplete account. However, it can be argued that these approaches are very innovative allowing for insights into context, relationships and behaviour. They not only provide information and enrich analysis about macro-level policy processes and power structures, but also include aspects that have been ignored by those who criticise these approaches. Therefore, how to inform future studies and enrich the construction of data, data analysis,

³³ In this study it is hard to tell what a counterfactual would be. It might be necessary to deepen the historical analysis upon Brazil's, India's and China's health systems and reforms.

and theoretical and historical perspectives vis-à-vis power analysis? As Eckl signalled “to what extent the tension between different views of power can be resolved within an individual text” (p. 13) and “if a text can still be part of the power-analysis family even though it is not labelled as such” (p. 11).

In the end, the question is one of researcher motivations if he/she aims to test or build theory, and/or to explain certain power dynamics, or all of these, test, build and explain. Furthermore, what is implicated in these questionings is the issue of validity or what valid research is with regards to ‘valid’ questions, data and data analysis. As Flicker (2004:543) argues the question should rather be “what is this research valid for?”³⁴ Validity should be a continual process of interrogation, having “the chance to discuss, clarify, and re-evaluate the purpose of our approach”, as she continues (ibid). The strength of Eckl’s and the doctoral research methodological approaches seem to lie in the constant effort to dialogue with the research’s initial motivation and the complex and multiple perspectives that emerge throughout the research, trying to gain insights and ‘adding spices’ to the issue under study.

In order to amplify the researcher’s vision and exercise of self-reflection vis-à-vis power analysis it would be interesting to investigate how ‘power’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘practices’ are placed at the centre of different fields of inquiry, such as international development cooperation and global health, and the parallels and the controversies that emerge from these epistemological and methodological dialogues.

³⁴ Reference to Aguinaldo, J.P. (2004) Rethinking validity in qualitative research from a social constructivist perspective: from “Is this valid research?” to “What is this research valid for?” *The Qualitative Report*, 9:1, 127-136.

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