Introduction to the Special Issue on Cultural Psychology and Qualitative Social Research in Vienna

KATHARINA HAMETNER
STEFAN HAMPL
AMREI C. JOERCHEL
MARKUS WRBOUSCHEK
University of Vienna &
Sigmund Freud University of Vienna

FOUNDATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE INSTITUTE OF CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY AND QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH (ikus)

"One must have chaos within oneself, to give birth to a dancing star."
(Nietzsche, 1885/2009, p.15)

When we founded ikus—The Institute of Cultural Psychology and Qualitative Social Research—two years ago, we started out with nothing; without a grand concept or business plan, without an office, without a single cent. Perhaps we can look back in a few years and *reconstruct* the genuine logic of the dynamics we have been experiencing at our young Viennese institute so far. Today this task is challenging and seems almost awkward in the midst of our *performance*. How can one describe a process that one is personally part of, especially as a psychologist and/or professionally trained social researcher? It is hard not to fall into the arcane traps of self-assurance that generally accompany young, ambitious projects. With an intelligible allegory Thomas Slunecko advises against the allurements of the situation. According to him this would be like drawing "the bull's eye around the bullet hole in retrospect and to pretend that everything had been consciously planned and intended to create the eventual result" (Slunecko, 2008, p.13).

Therefore, instead of suggesting a slick and homogenous success story of our institute, we would like to point the attention to the intricate antecedents of its foundation. From 2003-2006 the joint seminars of our later to become scientific directors Thomas Slunecko and Aglaja Przyborski belonged to the unofficial, but exceptional gems at the University of Vienna. These seminars soon turned into a receptacle of students from diverse disciplines with scientific curiosity in cultural psychology, media theory, iconic and visual research, as well as higher qualitative research methods. The conveyed ideas were so noticeably different from anything else we were exposed to before, that some of us initiated a dedicated reading group, whose members met in their spare time in order to read and discuss related texts more intensively. It is evident that the deep involvement and the discussions of those times have profoundly shaped the theoretical and methodological basis of our later institute. In those days our hopes were that the university or one of the key professors would create such an institute for us. We were, after all, only aspiring youngsters and not in the position of following through with 'such a big thing' on our own (at least we thought so at the time). We may have fantasized about our *own* institute, but never considered it a realistic and sustainable option. That time was more often than not marked with frustration than grand visions. In effect,

instead of founding an institute, we started a support group for disillusioned young psychologists and social researchers.

Out of context, this step might seem peculiar. However, a notable atmosphere of lethargy that was spreading among many formerly enthusiastic students heightened our frustration in late 2006. Scientific discussions were sagging and attendance to the abovementioned seminars was gradually shrinking. As it later turned out, many of us were missing a true sense of community that would not only provide exiting discussions, but also allow sharing personal issues and concrete matters, in particular the intimidating questions of finding one's own place in life and earning money. Facing the economies of the public Austrian university sector, the road into academia seemed to be a dead end. If there was nothing to be done about our situation, at least we wanted to share our personal sentiments.

We had, however, underestimated the power of solidarity. After only one or two sessions the shared frustration developed into the joint ambition of turning the academic world in Vienna upside down. In December 2006 we were meeting regularly in Viennese cafés around the university in order to formulate and write the articles of our association. The news spread like a bush fire amongst friends, and soon our group had grown to 21 people, who were willing to become members and contribute to our future institute. Our group was far from being homogenous, but young at age or young at heart. Among the founders were aspiring and senior psychologist, sociologists, communication researchers, philosophers, students, young business people and even self-employed people without any academic background.

Obviously, the biggest challenge has been to let this heterogenic 'critical mass' articulate itself in its own productive way. Meeting for sessions regularly has done the trick so far. We established a *jour fixe* every two weeks in order to discuss topical issues and strategic questions.

One of the first tasks of our institute was to find and create spaces in which we could present our thoughts and our work. We started off by participating in an international conference at the Ivan Franko University of Lviv, Ukraine where we presented papers, master theses and dissertation concepts in 2007. One year later we initiated our own cultural research presentation at the Kliment Ohrid University of Sofia, Bulgaria. Both events offered an abundance of international contacts with other researchers, some of which are now providing commentaries to the papers of this issue.

Meanwhile ikus has become an accredited institution of the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG). Our members are teaching and researching at various Austrian universities. Along with a clear focus on basic research, ikus has been carrying out around 20 projects of applied research for companies within the last year. In the sphere of academic training we have initiated regular reading groups and a method forum for higher qualitative research methods. Since October 2008 psychology students are able to complete their compulsory practical training at ikus.[1]

The shared experience of realizing some of our aspirations, or, as Nietzsche might put it, transforming our "chaos" into a "dancing star" (Nietzsche, 1885, p.15), is probably the

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[1] For more information see: www.ikus.cc

greatest joy for each of us. It has not only strengthened us as a group and made the initial founders more self-confident, but has also attracted new members. At its core ikus is a great pool of people who help and support each other through their networks, expertise and emotional backings. In this respect the cohesion of our institute can also be seen as the practical counterpart to our theoretical credo of cultural psychology and qualitative social research.

OUTLOOK AND STANDPOINT OF THE INSTITUTE

As an institute which investigates cultural-psychological questions, ikus applies a methodological framework from which cultural phenomena can be understood and analysed. Drawing on the rich tradition of qualitative research strategies our aim is to combine theoretical reflections with practical empirical research within various social fields. Furthermore, we aspire to re-insert the gathered knowledge into the social field by initiating projects and activities which can and should help develop culturally sensitive forms of social practise. In doing so, we seek to avoid reductionist and one-sided models of society and culture, as for example ethno-centristic concepts might do.

Understanding Culture and Cultural Psychology

In our understanding 'culture' is seen as a heterogeneous phenomenon, which is rooted in everyday practise and consists of acts as well as the materialisations of such acts (e.g. objects, texts, institutions etc.). The latter is of particular importance to the nature of cultural psychology in Vienna, which is related to media theory and material culture (see Slunecko, 2008; Slunecko & Hengl, 2006). As opposed to classical thinking, the cultural concept employed at ikus neither draws on the traditional distinction between high, popular or trivial cultural manifestations, nor does it follow the concept of national culture. Instead 'cultures' are conceived as spheres of experience *(Erfahrungsräume)* (Mannheim, 1980), which are constituted in relation to others (as human beings), to the other (as materialisations of practises), to the manifold social practises in which social relations are per- and transformed and to the media involved. According to Slunecko (2008) human beings, culture and media cannot be comprehended separately from one another. Their reciprocal interplay is fundamental to what he calls the "dynamic constitution." Therefore our cultural concept does not separate culture from its human constituents, but understands culture as the indispensable atmosphere that they are breathing and supplying. According to Hall and Ha (Hall, 2004; Ha, 2002; 2004) 'cultures' are never closed systems of relations but are constantly changing and thus open to new and sometimes even contradictory developments. Therefore the historical, social and mediated dynamics of culture and human beings are the key elements of our approach to cultural psychology.

Qualitative Methods

Based on the abovementioned concept of culture, as social practise and sphere of experience *(Erfahrungsraum)*, ikus conducts research projects in various social fields using a variety of qualitative research methods. The aim is to develop ways of advanced theorizing of specific cultural practises and processes, thereby developing a differentiated insight into the rules that govern cultural life. Following the logic of qualitative research methodology, our work starts with analyses of everyday action and experience. In doing so, we seek to avoid schemes of interpretation that reduce complex

social phenomena to simplistic causal relations. In contrast, our aim is to account for the complexity of the *Lebenswelt* (life world) (Schütz, 1971). Our focus is put on the structures of meaning which underlie social relations. In this context, meaning is seen on the one hand as partially reflexive knowledge that can be directly obtained by explicitly questioning people. On the other hand, meaning is also incorporated implicitly in our everyday actions as a performative form of *knowing-how-to-do-something* (Mannheim, 1980; Bourdieu, 1987; 1997). This action based knowledge is not accessible to direct techniques of communication and therefore requires more refined methods of empirical research (e.g. Bohnsack, 2007, Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2008). ikus deals with both of these forms of socially constitutive knowledge. We are particularly interested in the intersection between the reflexive (what we think) and the implicit (what shows in our acts) aspects of knowledge in everyday practise.

ikus as a Critical Project

As part of our affiliation with the methodology of qualitative social research, we reflect on our own position as researchers—within the social fields we investigate *and* in our own cultural practise—which is our scientific practise (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2008). This also implies the option, and sometimes the responsibility, to criticize practises which we understand as reductionist in regard to our perception of culture and human relations within social practises and institutions (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Jäger, 2008). Thus, the social, economic, and political context of our work plays an important role in the research and practical activities conducted at ikus. On the basis of our scientific expertise we try to formulate concepts that can be adopted for the improvement of specific cultural interactions and processes. In this sense we see our work not only as a scientific enterprise, but also as a social practise in a wider sense, which includes petitioning for change and improvement in areas we study and thereby interact with. We further see our work as the opportunity to reflect on one's own cultural practises from different angles and thus enabling a better understanding of the perspectives that underlie—often misunderstood or not seen at all—our actions within our lives.

Perspectives

ikus is a place in which scientific exchange between scholars of multiple disciplines of cultural study is encouraged and in which independent research and publication projects—such as this one—are supported. As an independent institute ikus aspires to provide possibilities for young researchers to follow their own scientific interests within the field of cultural sciences. Apart from its research activities, ikus offers opportunities for qualification and professional development. The exchange between advanced social research and practical application and refinement of concepts developed allows for a fluent exchange of experience between the so-called academia and those areas of social life, in which the accumulated knowledge can be put to work (such as coaching, training and clinical-psychological counselling). ikus stands for scientific freedom, exchange, and diversity, and a critical interest in the world we live in. The mutual recognition of social theory and praxis are at the foundation of our work.

THIS ISSUE – AN OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLES

In an attempt to introduce some research interests of members of ikus, we have come forth with a collection of articles to compose this special issue.[2] The idea of this special issue focusing on research conducted mostly by scientists from this institute was to introduce some of the topics which are of interest to members of ikus and in general to social researchers in Vienna. A further aim was to establish a ground on which discussions between scholars from different countries and disciplines can take place. All of the main articles were written by scholars who are affiliated with the Viennese social scientific community in one way or another.[3] The articles are commented on by scholars from other disciplines or other countries. The contributors of this special issue incorporate undergraduate students (for some of them this may be their first publication), graduate students, as well as advanced social scientific researchers who have worked in the field for many years.

An Overview of the Articles

As the focus of our institute lies in combining theoretical, methodological, as well as empirical work in the social sciences this special issue is comprised of papers representing all three fields. Within the theoretical realm, Nora Ruck opens this special issue with her critical analyses of the conception of the body in dialogical self theory: *Some Historical Dimensions of the 'Dialogical Body': From Bakhtin's Dialogical Grotesque Body to the Monological Body of Modernity* (pp. 8-17). She draws a historical sketch in which a shift from the perception of 'being a body' and 'having a body' can be detected. The dialogical self theory also receives some attention in the second article, *Reflexive and Non-reflexive Identity Perceptions: Finding a Balance,* composed by Katharina Hametner and Amrei C. Joerchel (pp. 22-28). In general Hametner and Joerchel criticize the heavy emphasis on the reflexive aspects in identity theories and argue for a position which incorporates reflexive as well as non-reflexive aspects.

The third paper, *Discourse Analysis and Social Critique,* by Markus Wrbouschek (pp. 36-44), deals with a critical reflection of discourse analysis and its critical agenda within the social sciences. Wrbouschek mainly argues for a position in which the scientist and his critique are always 'trapped' within the discourse himself/herself. Petra Steiner and Barbara Pichler discuss concrete examples of applying specific methodological approaches, in their case objective hermeneutics, with their example of female adult education: *'Objective Hermeneutic': Methodological Reflections on Social Structures in Women's Lives* (pp. 50-54). Steiner and Pichler map out why an objective hermeneutic approach serves this particular kind of social research best. In her paper *Re-Constructing Women's Experience of Sexual Pain: The 'Deviant' Body as an Object of Cultural Psychological and Feminist Considerations* (pp. 60-71), Riegler exemplifies how a 'disorder' can be terribly *misunderstood* and *mistreated* if the general medical and psychological approach does not allow for novel perspectives, e.g. a cultural psychological perspective or a feminist one.

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[3] Most of them are also members of ikus. We are happy to also welcome one contribution of two Viennese social researchers who are not members, Petra Steiner and Barbara Pichler with their contribution on objective hermeneutics.

The following are examples of empirical studies. Martina Eberharter brings forth a paper on her research interest in the role of the police: *A Grounded Action Study on the Role of the Police* (pp. 80-86). Eberharter discusses some important aspects of societal norms as well as in-group identity and how these are not only maintained, but also initiated. Katja Huber, Marie-Christin Rissinger, Birgit Stabler and Daniel Weigl focus on the field of Viennese female prostitution. In their paper *A Different View on Prostitution: the World's Oldest Trade or a Story of Women like You and Me* (pp. 95-98), Huber et al. publish their first results from some research in which they conducted several interviews with various key-figures in the world of Viennese prostitution.

In the vain of transcending the standard rigor of Austrian, and more specifically Viennese academia, we have aimed at opening up borders to people with diverse ideas, critical perspectives, various levels of education and, most importantly, an interest in research in its purest form. The result may seem rather eclectic, as we have tried to involve many young and upcoming scholars. The goal was not to intimidate by putting up rigorous selection procedures that would favour specific perspectives. Furthermore, in order to foster discussions, we invited various scholars from different universities and/or countries to write commentaries. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the contributors and at the same time encourage further exchange for future projects.

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[4] Contrary to APA guideline regulations, the references include the authors' first name in order to make women in science more visible. Due to androcentric schemes of perception we implicitly tend to expect men behind names which are not marked as female.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Katharina Hametner is a psychologist and PhD-scholar at the University of Vienna. She is lecturing at the Sigmund Freud University, Vienna and a founding member of ikus. Her main research interests are identity theory, qualitative methods, migration, and cultural psychology. Email katharina.hametner@ikus.cc

Stefan Hampl has graduated in psychology and business administration in Vienna. He is executive chairman and a founding member of ikus, coordinator of the psychology program at the Sigmund Freud University, Vienna and a PhD-scholar at the University of Vienna. His research focus is qualitative video analysis. Email stefan.hampl@ikus.cc

Amrei C. Joerchel is currently working on her PhD at the University in Vienna and has started her postgraduate training to become a psychotherapist. In her research she is mainly interested in the concept of identity and culture. She is a founding member of ikus. Email amrei.joerchel@ikus.cc

Markus Wrbouschek has studied psychology and philosophy at the University of Vienna (Magister in psychology). He is currently lecturing at the Sigmund Freud University in Vienna. Scientific interests include economic psychology, qualitative research methods/methodology—especially discourse analysis. The author is a founding member of ikus. Email markus.wrbouschek@ikus.cc