

Prologue

Figure 1: Photography showing visitors of The Art Institute of Chicago while watching a photography that shows earlier visitors of the museum looking at the painting Rue de Paris, temps de pluie by Gustave Caillebotte (1877); Of Observing the Observers of Observers



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“The best way to begin is by approaching your dissertation in your imagination, preparing to write in and about this thesis at every stage and to become the researcher of your own work process.” (Bolker 1998: 3–4).

“But whom are you writing for?” the professor asked. “Well, I’ve been interested in the topic of conflict escalation for a long time now. First of all, I’m writing *for me*, to implement an inspiring idea that, to my knowledge, did not show up before and thus to get this dissertation done!” the PhD candidate answered impulsively right after the presentation of his project while he was yet thinking about a more ‘scientific’ answer he would give in a moment. “I mean, who are the readers you have in mind? Who are the people you wish to engage with the things that matter most to you?” the professor eagerly added. “Well, since I was socialised as a political scientist with a focus on International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies in the first stages of my professional career”, the PhD candidate replied, “I cannot hide my ambition to make a modest contribution to conflict analysis within this field. On the other hand, however, during my research in the last years, I’ve been dealing with sociological theories extensively, particularly concerning Luhmann’s work. Therefore, I would be happy to promote systems theoretical thinking with regard to empirical research on violent conflict in general. I am convinced that this perspective will open up what I have increasingly experienced as narrow horizons.”

In a straight reaction to this statement, one of the other participants of the PhD students colloquium asked, “So, would you label your dissertation as an interdisciplinary project?” *Okay, I hope that this question won’t be the starting point of an epic debate on the pros and cons of inter- or transdisciplinary research designs*, the PhD candidate thought, then he frankly answered. “Let me put it this way: If you’re interested in the following question – How do conflicts escalate? – I don’t mind whether you see yourself as a sociologist, a political scientist, an IR-specialist, a peace researcher or, let’s say, ... a historian. You will definitely find a comprehensible part to the answer in my work which I would dub as a Peace and Conflict Studies dissertation!”

While diverse feedback on the presentation was collected in plenary, the PhD Candidate could only listen with half an ear. He was still pondering about his last statement. *Do I really offer a study that is comprehensible for such a diverse range of readers?* As he increasingly felt the urge to consolidate his argument, he once again raised his hand and referred to the fundamental work of Niklas Luhmann. “You can criticise Luhmann for many things”, he continued his prior remarks, “for example, for the hypercomplex character and elitist style of his language or the virtual indifference concerning empirical research. However, what I find deeply enlightening is Luhmann’s understanding of communication as the very essential building block of the social and, based on that, his concept of social systems. I am convinced that his complex thoughts can be fruitfully developed for empirical conflict research, particularly when it comes to Luhmann’s all-encompassing idea of observation. Therefore, any observation, which means every act of communicative distinction and indication, has its blind spot since it cannot observe itself. For me, it is both a provocative and comforting thought to realise that any observation, be it, for example, in the context of the media, politics, science and, perhaps most striking (!), in my dissertation, is a product of the observing system. Having this in mind, the many rivalries over epistemological competences within and between the disciplines that bother us so

often in this research colloquium and beyond can be viewed in a different light, right? In other words, contrary to the all-embracing ambition often ascribed to systems theory, its take on science is rather modest, saying: Don't let us attach too much importance and absoluteness to theories! In the end, they're based on contingent observations that could have been done differently. So, coming back to the initial question, I would say that I wish those people to engage with my work who are not too much stuck in disciplinary thinking and those who like to let themselves be positively irritated by research that cannot be immediately classified in conventional ways... Any questions left? ☺ ”

On the way home from university, the PhD candidate was reflecting on the many thought-provoking remarks the participants of the colloquium gave him to take along. While he was thinking about how to integrate them in his work, he remembered the key sentence from Joan Bolker's very common PhD-guide, which a good colleague had warmly recommended at the beginning of the project. *To write in and about this thesis at every stage and to become the researcher of your own work process.* “I think it's working...” the PhD candidate muttered under his breath while going home.

