Applying process-oriented methodology to spatial research

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From the perspective of historical and process-oriented research, spatial transformation processes—like any social change—are phenomena that should be studied while taking into account their *historicity* and *temporality*. The manner in which spatial structures change and the reasons for their current configuration can only be understood fundamentally if current events are put into context with their formation. Therefore, process-oriented research inquiries into the "being so and not otherwise [So-und-nicht-anders-Gewordensein]" (Weber 2002: 103) and understands temporality and processuality as a key analytical category (Baur 2005: 13). The objective of process-oriented social research is "to explain the existence of a circumstance based on its history, thus interpreting it as part of a process that led from the past to the present with the future lying ahead as an open horizon" (Schwietring 2015: 151, own translation). The historical-sociological study of spatial phenomena does not aspire to reconstruct the past in its own interests, but rather it involves using the explanation potential of socio-historical events for the present (Schützeichel 2004: 9).

Over the last several years, the debate about the socio-theoretical link between space and time has intensified. For example, Laux et al. (2017) raised the question of conceptualizing the relationship between space and time, developing the concept of a "social space-time [gesellschaftliche Raumzeit]." The authors characterize the added value of this debate compared to the established yet hitherto poorly connected works in temporal and spatial sociology "first based on the analytical connection between time and space, second given the incorporation of the materiality of time and space, and third thanks to the connection between theoretical concepts and the empirical exploration of time and space in society" (Laux et al. 2017: 4, own translation). However, they focus on theoretical aspects that are studied empirically but remain unsystematic from a methodological standpoint. Fraya Frehse (2020) addresses this gap in the state of research by developing "temporal-spatial scales," which provide a heuristic approach to the empirical study of the production of space. At the same time, she shows how the future, empirically driven, theoretical conceptualization of sociological spatial research can benefit from a spatio-temporal methodological foundation. However, it should be noted that process-oriented

analyses of space have not yet systematically addressed issues and consequences related to the methodologies beyond the different theoretical and methodological schools used for concrete operationalizations.

This represents a gap in the research that needs to be filled since the methodological perspective of process-oriented research offers great potential for diverse units of analysis in spatial research. This becomes clear when using process-oriented perspectives in exploratory studies on space, even though the methodological aspects of process-oriented spatial research are rarely substantiated in these studies (see Christmann 2014). For example, temporality is just as decisive for understanding how different cultural spaces or nations are formed (see Weber 1922; Elias 1994) or how the intrinsic logics of cities that evolved historically appear today in terms of their economic practices and how they see themselves and others (see Berking/Schwenk 2011; Baur et al. 2014), or for determining how types of road usage are constituted or how spatio-temporal perceptions affect biographies (see Frehse 2017; Weidenhaus 2017). A historical and process-oriented methodology is therefore suited for performing spatial research at different social aggregation levels (macro, meso, and micro) and on a wide range of different phenomena (e.g., structures of urban and regional development, economic or cultural processes, forms of communication, interactions, constitution of subjects, etc.).

Even if not every space-related research project can focus on time and historicity as its topic of interest (nor is this necessary), familiarity with the process-oriented methodology at least makes it possible to reflect on simplistic explanatory approaches for social change fixed entirely in the present and to take advantage of the socio-historical method.

Certainly, the process-oriented perspective is not an immutable doctrine of methods or a rigid research agenda. Rather, the historical, process-oriented methodology implies a series of taxonomic considerations spatial researchers must take into account when analyzing social change (Hergesell et al. 2020). In turn, these classifications affect the operationalization of the concrete research project. Below I present the key dimensions of the historical and process-oriented approach, as well as its duration and progression, while discussing which decisions must be made during the research process in this regard and which methodological consequences those decisions entail. Afterward, I describe the process of periodization according to the discipline of history.[1] Here my descriptions are based on the study of how the spatial knowledge of children and youth has changed (Million et al. 2020; Castillo Ulloa et al. 2021; also see Castillo Ulloa/Schwerer in this handbook).

1 Key dimensions of the process-oriented approach

The *key dimensions* of the process-oriented approach can be understood as a series of explanatory questions and steps in spatial research processes. The *duration* and *progression* of spatial transformation processes have a major impact on the amount of data available

1 The following definitions of duration, progression, and periodization, as well as their representation, are based on preliminary studies on process methodology carried out by Nina Baur (2005; et al. 2021).

and thus the data collection and analysis, as well as the interpretation of the findings in the end (Baur 2005). To what extent addressing the key dimensions of the process-oriented approach is meaningful and using a perspective focused exclusively on the present is beneficial always depends on the specific interest of the spatial research questions being asked.

The research project *Education: Spatial Knowledge of Children and Youth in Planning*,[2] which I use below as an example of a process-oriented methodology, analyzes how subjective spatial knowledge changes and the associated constitution of spaces (Million et al. 2020; Castillo Ulloa et al. 2021; also see Castillo Ulloa/Schwerer in this handbook). The topic of interest in this particular project lends itself for discussing the process-oriented approach as it investigates a prolonged process, lasting since the 1970s, associated with the refiguration of spaces (Knoblauch/Löw 2017) and thus at the same time answers a question relevant to the present day.

1.1 Duration

Spatial social change extends across different periods of time, depending on the phenomenon being studied and the concrete research question. This duration (also referred to as a temporal layer or *durée* in French) denotes the time during which the process unfolds and takes effect (Baur 2005: 99–103, 138–142). As is the case with all other social processes, spatial phenomena also exhibit different durations. These are relevant for deciding which methods can be used to study spatial phenomena and which data can be collected.

Three types of duration can be distinguished from one another within the process-oriented approach (Baur 2015; Baur et al. 2021):

Long duration (French *longue durée*) refers to processes that last from several centuries to 80–70 years before the present. An example of a long-term spatial process is the spread of the production-based and sedentary lifestyle (agriculture and livestock farming or Neolithic Revolution) from the *Fertile Crescent* in Western Asia starting in 12th century BC, which lasted several centuries and first reached Central Europe five to six centuries later. The formation of the European nations and the associated spatial transformation processes from the beginning of the modern era into the 20th century also fall within the scope of long duration. Geels and Kemp (2012) provide an example of a *shorter* process that is still included under long duration with their study on the transition from horse-drawn carriages to the spread of streetcars and finally the dominance of the automobile in the period from 1880 to the middle of the 20th century across US cities. This led to a massive restructuring of urban space in the field of urban design, transforming our way of life into a *car culture* (drive-ins, suburbanization, etc.) and impacting the image of our cities to this day.

2 The project is being led by Angela Million and is part of Collaborative Research Centre 1265 *Re- Figuration of Spaces* (https://sfb1265.de/en/subprojects/the-spatial-knowledge-of-young-adults-the-constitution-of-online-offline-and-hybrid-spaces/ I would like to thank Angela Million, Anna Juliane Heinrich, Ignacio Castillo Ulloa, and Jona Schwerer for agreeing to let me use the project as an example and for their cooperation.

It is clear that long-term processes can extend across very different periods of time. However, they all share the same implications for the selection of methods and data. Because the periods of investigation considered *longue durée* are in the distant past, it is not possible to collect research-induced data, meaning data generated as part of the research process. Therefore, it is necessary to use process-generated data. For example, any type of documents (certificates, official statistics, newspapers, letters, diaries, etc.) can be used, but material artifacts or landscapes can also provide information about the development of a process. The major challenge for (extremely) long-term processes is that researchers are forced to work with the data they can find. This requires a certain degree of flexibility and competence when preparing the data. The analysis methods used are primarily text-based techniques such as hermeneutic approaches and secondary analyses of data prepared from historical studies, among others (Hergesell 2019: 104–108). But methods focused on materiality, such as the artifact analysis, are also possible.

Medium duration (spanning generations) includes all periods of time the actors can still remember, which means a maximum of 60–70 years. However, it is important to note that memories are not always bound to biological entities. For example, collective memories in organizations can be *forgotten* sooner if there is a high level of staff turnover. Medium-term spatial phenomena include the development of regional (or city-specific) conventions for economic activity in response to the economic crises of the 1970s, as illustrated by Nina Baur et al. (2014) based on the example of barbershops in Dortmund, Frankfurt a. M., Birmingham, and Glasgow. But medium duration could also include how spatio-temporal transformations impact biographical self-perceptions (Weidenhaus 2017). Similar to long duration, medium-term processes can only be studied using ethnographies or observations to a limited extent. In contrast, other types of research-induced data can certainly be collected. The method of choice is usually collecting interview data. Interview techniques targeting events that occurred a long time ago are ideal for this purpose, such as retrospective qualitative interviews or narrative-biographical interviews (see Weidenhaus/Norkus in this handbook)—at least as long as people can be found to provide information about the processes being studied. Otherwise, it is necessary to use process-generated data.

And lastly, there is *short duration*, which can last from a few moments to several days or weeks. In short-term processes, the topic of interest is typically focused on series of interactions or linked actions that are very limited in terms of time and space, although they can be very complex nevertheless. For example, spatial research could be interested in orientation behavior, studying how actors orient themselves when reading maps and how spatial orientation is negotiated interactively (Baur 2013). In addition, it is possible to analyze how aggression builds up over extended periods of time—for example, due to the spatial arrangements for entry points at soccer games—and what role material spatial order can play in conflicts between fans and security personnel (Keysers/Reichertz 2019). The advantage of analyzing short-term processes is that the full range of data collection and analysis techniques from empirical social research can be used. For very short processes, methods that can be used to collect *thick* data are particularly appropriate, such as ethnography in general or video analysis specifically. Interviews can also represent effective data collection tools; they are especially advantageous in this regard because the respondents can usually recall the events being investigated well. However,

process-generated data are also suitable for recording quick or fast-paced events: for example, recordings from security cameras or GPS data.

Based on the descriptions above, it is clear that the project *Education: Spatial Knowledge of Children and Youth in Planning* (in the first phase of the CRC 1265) investigates a medium-term phenomenon. The researchers study how spatial knowledge changes as a result of the refiguration of spaces (Knoblauch/Löw 2017) starting in the late-1960s. As such, the researchers decided to use a qualitative analysis of approx. 70 scientific studies that deal with this subject area from the 1970s onward in order to reconstruct how spatial knowledge has changed (Castillo Ulloa/Schwerer in this handbook). In order to study the repercussions in the present, an additional three case studies are carried out on the participatory planning of public spaces and the spatial knowledge expressed by young people in the process. Therefore, the research design of the project combines both process-generated and research-induced data, thus using the options available for medium-term processes.

1.2 Progression

In addition to the duration of the processes being investigated, the key questions of the process-oriented methodology also include the question of sequence. The analysis of progression determines whether certain patterns or regularities can be found in the history of the processes that have to be taken into account in the research design and in the data collection.

From a methodological point of view, it is possible to distinguish three (ideal) types of progression (Baur 2005: 125–137; Hergesell et al. 2020):

- *Ordered transformations* (trajectories) represent typical systematic patterns of change. The observed transformations take place continuously and over an extended period of time. An example of this type of progression is the development of power asymmetries between different economic regions. So, the possibilities of enforcing strategic interests in the economic relations between the Global South and North can be described as stable over centuries. Even if decolonization saw a leveling of the distribution of power between the North and South, which represents a (ordered) transformation, this was a long-lasting process with no sudden or abrupt changes. In terms of data collection in the case of an ordered transformation, data must be collected repeatedly over a long period of time in order to establish an ongoing change (Baur 2005: 130–133; 152–159).
- *Processes characterized by fractures* (turning points) have a completely different type of progression. These processes are marked by abrupt change that permanently alters structural characteristics in a short period of time. Typical examples of such progressions include revolutions or crises: For example, the structures of cities can change radically in the wake of (natural) disasters. With regard to data collection and the selection of reference dates, a fractured progression means that data must be collected at least four times. Data should be collected twice before the fracture, first to characterize the general development that led to the fracture and then again shortly before the fracture to understand the triggering events. Likewise, data should be collected

once more shortly after the fracture to determine the immediate consequences of the fracture and one last time at a later date in order to observe the long-term consequences of the fracture (Baur 2005: 133–137; Baur et al. 2021).

- *Cycles* (recurrences) refer to recurring patterns in the course of the process, although the temporal intervals in which recurrences are observed can vary considerably. For example, the use of public space repeats itself cyclically in cities with temperate climates. The number of visitors to parks, open-air events, etc. or the selection of different modes of transport changes with the seasons and is repeated cyclically at regular intervals within the relatively short period of a year. It is much more difficult to identify cyclical patterns in a prolonged or irregular progression of events; although they are found in recurring, structural conditions, they manifest (empirically) in very different forms. For example, recurring phases of spatial mobility (or immobility) can be observed in the biographical course of a person's life (e.g., moving out of their parents' house, job-related mobility, etc.). However, these are generation-specific and therefore vary from generation to generation; as a result, it can be difficult to identify such recurring patterns. Hence, cyclical patterns of progression pose major challenges for researchers in terms of data collection, too. They require as much data and as many reference dates as possible in order to recognize latent recurring patterns in the body of data (Baur 2005: 127–130, 191–209).

With regard to the types of progression, it is clear that methodological and theoretical-conceptual aspects in spatial research processes are closely connected. If researchers decide to focus on the present or the recent past in their research question, the progression of a process can appear similar to a radical fracture, while choosing an extended period of investigation can result in a cyclical progression or a fracture that more closely resembles an overarching, lengthy transformation.

The type of progression the researchers identified in the project *Education: Spatial Knowledge of Children and Youth in Planning* depended in part on their initial empirical results. Previous key factors included the fact that the growing mediatization starting in the 1960s impacted the perception of spaces and could have been decisive when it came to a change in spatial knowledge. Accordingly, this would constitute an ordered transformation whose progression should ideally be studied by collecting data continuously throughout the entire course of the process (from 1960 until the present). Ultimately, however, this can only be clarified as the research project progresses. For example, it is necessary to determine how the spread of the smartphone in just a few years should be classified within this multi-decade process. Thus, the classification of progression types is in itself an empirical, far-reaching, and often difficult question, as illustrated in the descriptions of *periodization* below.

1.3 Periodization

While the key categories duration and progression should be taken into account in every process-oriented research project, periodization is an elaborate process that descended from historical studies and historical sociology and that is primarily used for longer-lasting processes (Baur 2005: 82–93; Hergesell 2019: 96–103; Hergesell et al. 2020: 13–16). Pe-

riodization refers to the division of the entire span of the study into individual temporal segments (periods). The purpose of periodization is to split the tremendous complexity of socio-historical processes into small manageable units: the periods. In addition to breaking up long processes analytically, periodization offers the advantage of allowing individual periods to be compared with each other after being reconstructed. By comparing *period-specific* developments, researchers can determine how the social transformation being studied took place, assign critical events to individual periods, and finally identify causal correlations between periods from long ago and events in the current time period (the present).

Periodization can be classified into roughly three different approaches, which vary in terms of how precise and time-consuming they are and which require more or less process-methodological competence. For all periodization processes alike, researchers first have to define the beginning of their analysis period, which is called the *formative period* (Berking/Schwenk 2011: 256). Key events that are thought to have brought about the constitution of the process being investigated are generally used for this purpose. Therefore, the formative period refers to the start of the social transformation that is to be studied and/or that is related to the phenomena of interest in the present.

- The periodization technique that requires the least amount of effort is to set fixed interval lengths (Baur et al. 2021; Hergesell et al. 2020). Starting from the formative period, fixed periods of time are defined—for example, ten-year intervals—to produce individual periods. Subsequently, the periods that were created can be analyzed little by little and the genesis of the social transformation can be gradually reconstructed. However, there are several disadvantages opposing the low effort involved in this type of periodization. On the one hand, this produces a relatively large number of periods, no fewer than 20 for a 200-year process. Since it is necessary to collect data for each period, qualitative-interpretative research in particular quickly reaches the limits of the amount of data that can be processed. On the other hand, setting intervals that are too large poses an analytical problem. In this case, it is necessary to collect data in each individual period in order to characterize the specifics of the period or the time-specific development of the process being analyzed. Because only a limited amount of data (and reference dates) can be collected for practical reasons, it is easy for relevant events to be omitted from the data in periods of 50 years and thus to be neglected in the analysis.
- Another option is to define periods (limits) based on the state of research or the prior knowledge of the researchers about the phenomenon (Baur et al. 2021; Hergesell et al. 2020). This makes it possible to study typical spatial dynamics of change effectively and to use them as a guide for the periodization. For example, the following events could serve as useful period limits for spatial-territorial transformation processes in the modern history of Germany: the beginning of the War of the First Coalition (Napoleonic Wars) (starting in 1792), the foundation of the North German Confederation (1867) or the German Empire (1871), the territorial-political changes following the First and Second World War or the Treaty of Versailles (1919), the Potsdam Agreement (1945), and German Reunification (1990). It is clear that the decisions made regarding periodization greatly depend on the object of investigation and that periodization is a

theory-based technique. Drawbacks include the fact that the preconceptions brought deductively into the study process can desensitize the researchers to new, unanticipated results, which is disadvantageous in exploratory-inductive research designs in particular. In addition, some spatial transformation processes have only been investigated to a limited extent, which means the state of research is not sufficient for performing periodization.

- Finally, it is worth mentioning the empirically based inductive definition of period limits (Baur 2017; Hergesell 2019: 96–99; Hergesell et al. 2020). In this case, relatively stable phases and structural fractures in the course of the process are identified as period limits based on the in-depth analysis of empirical material. Therefore, the periods determined in this manner are not random or theory-based, but rather they are defined by means of induction. For this approach, it is essential for the periods to be established in close connection with the process being investigated, which means they should be appropriate for the object of investigation and distortions caused by theoretical preconceptions should be avoided. In this case, period limits are always identified whenever a change actually takes place with regard to the period-specific characteristics in the body of data during the process.

Thus, empirical-inductive periodization for the research project *Education: Spatial Knowledge of Children and Young People in Planning* could mean that the formative period represents the onset of mediatization in the 1960s. Based on this theory, it is now necessary to verify which developments are period-specific for the first "mediatization" period (e.g., the rise of the television as a form of mass media). Here it would be necessary to clarify how mediatization affected the spatial knowledge of children and young people specifically and how these developments differ from past developments (e.g., the significance of spatial knowledge transferred via television). Next the researchers could define further period limits (e.g., the spread of the Internet or the spread of mobile end devices, especially the smartphone). Finally, contextual, inductive periodization raises the empirical question of which structural transformations in spatial knowledge are period-specific and how their individual developments could potentially explain spatial knowledge at present.

2 The potential of the process-oriented methodology for spatial research

In spatial research, the process-oriented approach plays a key role in understanding the cause of spatial transformation processes and in answering present research questions by reconstructing their underlying historical conditions. Although temporality and historicity can be observed in the methodology of virtually all spatial research endeavors, a temporal or historical reference can be pronounced differently depending on the phenomenon being studied, the research question, and the prior methodological knowledge of the researchers. This also raises the question of whether and how prevailing spatial knowledge must be taken into account at different times in order to understand the reasons behind spatial transformation processes. In some research projects, reconstructing the (subjective) spatial knowledge of different periods and the subsequent compari-

son of those periods are indispensable. This is the only way to assess spatial knowledge adequately for specific periods in terms of its temporal and social positionality and its effects. In other research projects, by contrast, it may be worth studying space-related changes by analyzing material remnants, which can be equally meaningful for the qualitative analysis of spatial transformation. Therefore, the potential of a (historical) process-oriented approach for qualitative spatial research does not lie in the definition of formulated instructions for the methodological procedure but rather in the awareness of process-oriented aspects to be considered in the research process and their implications for the operationalization of the research question.

These aspects include the key dimensions of the historical and process-oriented methodology: the types of duration and progression. The classified duration of the spatial and social transformation being studied has major implications for the type of data and survey methods that are available to the researchers. Analyzing the progression of spatial transformation processes provides information about patterns and regularities in social change, which in turn impacts the number and chronological order of the reference dates needed. Furthermore, the periodization method is suitable for defining the start of a spatial transformation process, breaking down the complexity of socio-historical processes analytically, identifying time-specific developments, and establishing references between the past and present.

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