

Queer/feminist perspectives on qualitative spatial research

Sandra Huning

“In the field of women’s studies, it is not enough to simply fill in unknown ‘white spots’ on the map; rather, the outlines of the continents have to be drawn anew.”
(Bauhardt 1996: 41, own translation)

Using the image of a map that is to be fundamentally redrawn instead of filled in, Christine Bauhardt illustrated in the mid-1990s the aspiration of contemporary women’s studies: to provide new categories, concepts, and methodologies for spatial and planning research. In urban and planning research, this inspiration has been picked up repeatedly and is now well established in the individual disciplines related to the exploration of space, especially in geography, sociology, urban and spatial planning, and architecture. Meanwhile, the current focus in feminist research is much wider today than it was in the 1990s. All topics from these disciplines are potentially part of feminist inquiry. Approaches from queer theory and postcolonial studies have also been employed successfully for feminist research. The objective mentioned in the opening quotation continues to apply: Feminist research aims to go beyond simply filling in knowledge gaps about previously “overlooked” social groups and positions, unknown territories, or underexposed issues. Rather, it is also concerned with fundamentally challenging the relevance, categories, and basic methodologies of scientific disciplines. These aspects should themselves become objects of study (Hark 2009: 32) in order to uncover power structures and epistemic gaps in the production of knowledge. Insights beyond what is currently known are to be gained; at the same time, new blind spots emerge, which serve to encourage further research.

In this paper, I present selected key feminist perspectives for the empirical study of spaces using qualitative methods. I start with a brief summary of queer/feminist critiques of science, which reveal epistemic gaps and propose a specific understanding of objectivity (Section 1). This results in (at least) two methodological conclusions. On the

one hand, a deconstructive strategy can help to situate categories and concepts within the context of their creation and to illustrate different—in particular, marginalized—lifeworlds and experiences (Section 2). On the other hand, researchers are called to reflect on their own positionality to reveal the social and political context of knowledge production, as well as their own role therein (Section 3). Finally, I discuss how these reflections can be incorporated into the qualitative exploration of spaces (Section 4).

1 Queer/feminist critique of science

Queer/feminist critique of science rejects the premise of universalistic knowledge production, which was promoted in the sciences for centuries, characterized by an androcentric bias in the wake of enlightenment (Althoff et al. 2001: 27). Starting in the early 1990s, feminist geographers began to contemplate the epistemic gaps (Rose 1993: 5). They criticized how many of their colleagues saw themselves as “detached explorers” who assumed they could produce knowledge that was “universal, neutral, objective, unproblematically communicable, and singularly true” (Bondi/Domosh 1992: 202 et seq.). In particular, the “white bourgeois heterosexual masculine theorist” (Rose 1993: 149) was criticized for doing research from an undefined standpoint in order to discover true and universal knowledge, while conceding other scientists—predominantly women—particularist viewpoints at best as alleged representatives of partial groups.

Contemporary feminist architecture and planning made a similar critique of male claims of universality and the so-called “god-father model” in planning. Many planners regarded themselves as neutral experts acting on behalf of an “objective” common good and able to make impartial decisions thanks to their extensive technical and scientific knowledge. Feminist critique of urban and planning theory was directed both toward professional exclusions and toward the contextual gaps that followed (see Fainstein/Servon 2005; Rodenstein 2005).

In contrast, feminist critique of science underscores that knowledge production takes place within social relationships, which are riddled with power relations, and that researchers cannot assume a neutral position outside of these relationships.¹ This gives rise to (at least) two conclusions: on the one hand, the need for researchers to reflect on their own positioning and their own experiences and perceptions because these influence the research process and the research findings, for example, with regard to the topic of interest, the selected methods, interactions, or the interpretation of the data; on the other hand, the demand to deconstruct concepts, certainties, and normalities to “situate and explain the production of truths within a societal framework as materialized forms that are created in relation to the context” (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 1996: 172, own translation).

1 This also applies to feminist researchers themselves: ‘White’ feminist researchers have themselves been accused of trying to represent a universalistic feminist standpoint that concealed racist social relations, among other things (Schuster 2019: 1). Today, feminism is thought of much more in terms of plural feminisms, providing space for different perspectives (Ankele et al. 2010).

Queer theory takes this one step further by advocating for the complete rejection of universal epistemic and normative principles in order to “dismantle and de-hierarchize normalized social relationships and especially sex and gender hierarchies, thus making heterogeneous understandings of the self and the world, as well as diverse modes of existence, conceivable” (Engel 2007: 285, own translation). Many queer analyses focus on the deconstruction of normality, normativity, and their role in stabilizing power relations (Browne et al. 2017: 1380). This also involves rejecting “ahistorical, universal truths and norms, as well as the concept of a holistic subject” (Engel 2007: 285, own translation). Terms, concepts, and identities are contextualized within space and time and thus become ambiguous. They can then be regarded (and investigated) as effects of symbolic-discursive processes that regulate, normalize, and stabilize concrete social (power) relations.

Queer and feminist critique of science addresses scientific objectivity as “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988). According to this understanding, researchers can adopt neither a universalistic nor a relativistic position, but rather must situate themselves explicitly within power-ridden discourses and processes. In doing so, their own positioning inevitably remains ambiguous, open-ended, and partial, but this is the only possibility to establish a relationship with a research topic, with interviewees, and with other participants:

“The split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history. [...] Here is the promise of objectivity: a scientific knower seeks the subject position, not of identity, but of objectivity, that is, partial connection.” (Haraway 1988: 586)

2 Deconstruction

Against this backdrop, exploring spaces does not mean investigating something that is “there” and simply needs to be discovered. Instead, many queer/feminist researchers assume that every research (re)constructs its object itself by selecting categories, methodological premises, and methods. Therefore, they do not attempt to identify the “true” qualities of (container) spaces and spatial phenomena by applying scientific methods in a controlled environment. Rather, many projects are based on a relational understanding of space (Schuster 2019: 2). Spaces are “a cut through the myriad stories in which we are all living at any one moment” (Massey 2013: 3) and can be experienced in entirely different ways at the same time. The preconceptions, categories, and methods of the researchers determine which perspectives become visible and which remain hidden.

Critical feminist sciences are always caught in a field of tension between the critique of power relations and the reproduction of hegemonic knowledge. Deconstruction as the “practice of feminist critique of science” means enduring this tension (Wartenpfehl 1996: 207, own translation). For example, research related to gender relations inevitably reproduces the hegemonic interpretation of the gender category itself. New categorizations are not a solution in this case because they, too, define inclusions and exclusions, just

in a different manner. By questioning the structures and mechanisms used to create the categories in the first place, deconstruction can uncover power structures and the contingency of current relations and create new spaces for creative thinking.

Especially by deconstructing spaces and the concepts inscribed in them—gender, sexuality, housing, working, family, public, private—it is possible to develop new research perspectives. Spatial settings reflect notions of masculinity and femininity, gender arrangements, or sexual norm(alitie)s and can either stabilize them or reveal fractures (see Frank 2003; Schuster 2010, 2019). The deconstruction of gendered “instructions, invocations, and valuations” (Maihofer 2004: 38, own translation) in different spaces illustrates how these not only stabilize the two-sex binary but also heterosexuality as a social norm and normality (see Frisch 2002; Oswin 2008). Intersectional perspectives bring to the light the interdependencies of various categories with regard to social inequality such as gender, race, and class (Walgenbach 2007).

With this in mind, Ruth Becker proposed the following strategy for planning research:

“A feminist planning theory must strive to discover how spatial structures and spatial planning [and of course also the categories and concepts used in this context; author’s note] contribute to the social (re-)construction of the dual-sex system in order to derive planning concepts that help disrupt this construction process and promote deconstruction.” (Becker 1998: 157, own translation)

Only then can we seriously address the question of (utopian) realms of possibilities that do not just reflect empirically observable social needs but also reveal opportunities for new forms of coexistence in which power relations are challenged and new possibilities for appropriation are offered. This means challenging concrete local needs, socio-cultural frameworks for interpretation, and symbolic orders of spaces based on the respective specific contexts, in order to determine the contingency of current relations. This requires in particular research perspectives and methods from social and cultural sciences to answer questions such as: How are spaces constituted, who constitutes them (who does not), and in what manner? Who speaks with which authority and by which means about spatial and gender relations and is able to assert conceptions of normality that engender inequalities and exclusions? And finally: How can we spatialize a utopia that rejects gender roles (Becker 1997: 27)?

3 Positionality and reflexivity

In her paper *Methodische Postulate zur Frauenforschung* (English: Methodological Postulates for Women’s Studies), Maria Mies (1984) demanded from researchers a deliberate partiality and their active participation in emancipatory activities: The objective of feminist research should not be to contribute better or more comprehensive data; rather, feminist research should deliberately aspire to eliminate oppression and exploitation. These postulates did not remain uncontested (see Althoff et al. 2001: 61 et seq.; Müller 2008; Wohlrab-Sahr 1993). Nevertheless, partiality, a focus on transformative instead of simply

explanatory knowledge, inter- and transdisciplinarity, self-reflection, and the critique of power continue to be intrinsic commonalities in queer/feminist research (Hofmeister et al. 2013).

From this perspective, the relationship between researchers and their research partners needs to be redefined: on the one hand, from a normative perspective, to overcome the traditional division between those doing the research and those being researched or between research subjects and objects and to understand this relationship as partnership, which ideally is beneficial to both parties. Even if cooperation at “eye-level” does not always work out in research practice—for example, due to unequal resource availability—or inevitably remains a utopian ideal (McDowell 1992: 408), researchers are called upon to reflect on their relationship and interactions with their research partners throughout the entire research process. Insights gained from this reflexion should then be incorporated into the further research. On the other hand, this means laying bare assumptions that normally go unspoken. If identities are relational and are constantly being renegotiated, this is also the case in the research process. For example, the perception of personal similarities and differences influences the behavior of all those involved. Caroline Faria and Sharlene Mollett (2014), for instance, show how “being *white*”—together with attributions of success, modernity, and prosperity—play out as structural privilege in their research in South American and Africa. They show that “being *white*” has various connotations across class, sexuality, religion, or gender, thus having distinct impacts in different socio-spatial settings. Who is considered *white* and who is attributed which power and which social standing is constantly being renegotiated; in this specific case, this had implications for how the researchers were met and what information they obtained. Other researchers talk about the significance of gender, sexuality, age differences, or physical impairments in the field, which can play out in various ways depending on the research partner (see England 1994; Valentine 2002; Shah 2006).

Therefore, “the reflexive and critical use of qualitative methods and the struggle for non-hierarchical and non-exploitative research practices” (Wastl-Walter 2010: 60, own translation) plays a key role in queer/feminist research despite the fact that non-hierarchical research practices do not rest in the hands of the researcher alone. Societal power relations also have an impact on the research relationship, not only in the intellectual exchange but also with regard to embodied knowledge, because subjectivity and experience are not detached from the body, but rather are situated in the body itself (Vacchelli 2018a: 17).

Furthermore, reflexivity has its limits because one’s own self is also relational and non-transparent (Rose 1997; Valentine 2002), thus making it impossible to entirely understand one’s own positionality and its effects. Each project represents a performative intervention between researchers and research partners. Identities and relationships can be reconstructed, but ultimately, they cannot be fully controlled. Therefore, Gillian Rose suggests modesty: “What we may be able to do is something rather more modest but, perhaps, rather more radical: to inscribe into our research practices some absences and fallibilities while recognizing that the significance of this does not rest entirely in our own hands” (Rose 1997: 319) since, “in reality the research process is beyond the understanding of the researcher” (Valentine 2002: 125).

4 Research methods and reflexive research process

Despite the above-mentioned insights into the challenges of deconstruction and into the impossibility of researchers to fully comprehend their own research process, there are practical attempts to reflect on and expose the unavoidable shortcomings, independently of the chosen research methods. Many researchers agree that there are no methods designed exclusively for queer/feminist research but that qualitative methods are especially suited for addressing the subjective reality of the research partners (Althoff et al. 2001; Wastl-Walter 2010: 59). In any case, this requires a complex theoretical basis (Krause 2003: 24). *Participatory* methods, in which researchers and research partners purposely co-produce knowledge (Wastl-Walter 2010: 60; also see McDowell 1992: 405; Schurr/Segebart 2012), have received widespread attention over the last several years, adding to the traditional spectrum of qualitative methods. The same is true for *performative* methods, which incorporate the body as a bearer of experiences and thus data (Vacchelli 2013, 2018a). Elena Vacchelli proposes the methods of collage making and digital storytelling from a queer/feminist research perspective (Vacchelli 2018b; Vacchelli/Peyrefitte 2018). They can be combined with oral history (Kuhn 2008) and with storytelling as it is discussed in spatial planning (Sandercock/Attili 2010). Nina Schuster (2010) illustrates compellingly how ethnography can be fruitful for feminist research. Moreover, discourse theories with references to the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault have been translated into empirical practice over the last several years (Wastl-Walter 2010: 61 et seq.), which has resulted in methods from linguistic philosophy being employed more and more frequently (see Jäger 2008; Sommer/Bembnista in this handbook).

Regardless of the selected data collection and analysis methods, many queer/feminist researchers address the question how reflexivity can be put into practice. Again, there are no universal guidelines in this regard. Research journals and field notes with records of what was experienced from a subjective perspective can be used to reveal personal assumptions, feelings, and reflexes in the analysis and can be fruitful for later research. On this basis, many authors recommend systematically created forms of collegial exchange during the research process: for example, everyday “kitchen table reflexivity” (Kohl/McCutcheon 2014), email conversations, correspondence or blogs between research teams (Browne et al. 2017), or even the reciprocal interpretation of interview material to reveal blind spots (Kohler Riessman 1991). Additionally, Liz Bondi (2009) proposes a teaching concept for giving future researchers the opportunity to experience reflexivity with their own body by means of deliberate exchange with others.

This short selection indicates that queer/feminist research requires personal commitment, social skills, and temporal resources. Ethical questions are raised that “detached explorers” did not have to address. In the end, there are always unanswered questions, and seeking answers anew in every project is what makes this both interesting and challenging—knowing that there can be no such thing as a conclusive answer or a universal truth.

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