



The Discursive Construction of Realities

The Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse

<http://kellersskad.blogspot.de/p/blog-page.html>



1) Universes of discourse (according to Alfred Schütz)

Continous permutations of discursive interactions
(Series of utterances/statements)



1945 Alfred Schütz on “Multiple realities”.

“Of course, the theoretical thinker may choose at his discretion, only determined by an inclination rooted in his intimate personality, the scientific field in which he wants to take interest and possibly also the level (in general) upon which he wants to carry on his investigation. But as soon as he has made up his mind in this respect, the scientist enters a preconstituted world of scientific contemplation handed down to him by the historical tradition of his science. Henceforth, he will participate in **a universe of discourse** embracing the results obtained by others, methods worked out by others. This theoretical universe of the special science is itself a finite province of meaning, having its peculiar cognitive style with peculiar implications and horizons to be explicated. The regulative principle of constitution of such a province of meaning, called a special branch of science, can be formulated as follows: Any problem emerging within the scientific field has to partake of the universal style of this field and has to be compatible with the preconstituted problems and their solution by either accepting or refuting them. Thus the latitude for the discretion of the scientist in stating the problem is in fact a very small one. (Schütz 1973, S. 250)

The significant gesture or symbol always presupposes for its significance the social process of experience and behavior in which it arises; or, as the logicians say, a universe of discourse is always implied as the context in terms of which, or as the field within which, significant gestures or symbols do in fact have significance. This universe of discourse is constituted by a group of individuals carrying on and participating in a common social process of experience [4] and behavior, within which these gestures or symbols have the same or common meanings for all members of that group, whether they make them or address them to other individuals, or whether they overtly respond to them as made or addressed to them by other individuals. A universe of discourse is simply a system of common or social meanings.

(George Herbert Mead: *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago 1963: 89f)

There has to be some such field as religion or economics in which there is something to communicate, in which there is a cooperative process, in which what is communicated can be socially utilized. One must assume that sort of a cooperative situation in order to reach what is called the "universe of discourse." Such a universe of discourse is the medium for all these different social processes, and in that sense it is more universal than they; but it is not a process that, so to speak, runs by itself.

G. H. Mead



2) The discursive construction of realities

“The people whom I talked with (...) presented a fairly uniform view of the problem. Alcohol leads to impaired driving and increases the risk of accident, injury and death. Since drinking coupled with driving ,causes‘ auto accidents, solutions lie in strategies which diminish either drinking or driving after drinking. The available strategy is to persuade the drinker not to get behind the wheel of the car. Law enforcement and punishment perhaps supplemented by education are the most useful and acceptable means to diminish auto accidents due to drinking. (...) This homogenous consciousness of alcohol and automobile use appears to the sociologist as a salient form of social control. It eliminates conflict or divergence by rendering alternative definitions and solutions unthinkable. This subtle, unseen implication of cultural ideas is perhaps the most powerful form of constraint. Unlike the conflict of power it goes unrecognized. What we cannot imagine, we cannot desire. (...) The absence of alternative modes of transportation is logically as much a cause of drinking-driving as is the use of alcohol.” (Gusfield 1981: 11)

“At any moment the ‘structure’ itself may be fought over as groups attempt to effect the definitions of problems and authority to affect them. (...) Structure is process frozen in time as orderliness. It is a conceptual tool with which we try to make that process understandable. What is important to my thought here is that all is not situational; ideas and events are contained in an imprecise and changing container.” (Gusfield 1981: 5ff)

3) The sociology of knowledge approach to discourse

SKAD

Social relationships of knowledge & politics of knowledge



Following knowledge(s) through society'

The notion of knowledge covers 'factual' knowledge, norms & moral claims, ideology and religious belief ->

Analyzing the role of knowledge (claims), knowledge making, contested knowledges in social conflicts, social change and in the dynamics/stabilization/transformation of realities

This is what SKAD is all about: *a research program with conceptual/heuristic tools (not a method, not a theory of discourse)*

How SKAD started....

- Comparative research on environmental discourses, politics and policies in Europe (e.g. waste issues, acid rain, climate change): Why all these differences? And what consequences?
- Starting with a framework in social movement research (frame analysis), but soon: The need for a social sciences perspective on “games of truth” and “power/knowledge” regimes: “the discursive construction of reality(ies)” (Angelika Poferl, 2004)

[Poferl, A. (2004): Die Kosmopolitik des Alltags. Berlin/The Cosmopolitics of Everyday Life]

SKAD's Theoretical Background:

- Berger/Luckmann: Social Construction including Alfred Schütz: how social worlds come to ,meaning': constitution and construction
- Symbolic IA, Pragmatist Sociology
- Foucault: different concepts and interests in DR



Conceptual Devices:

- Discourses & discursive formations (public or special arena):

-> discursive events: from utterances to statements
- Who is involved in articulation – and how? Social actors, speakers (speaker positions), discourse coalitions, silent (silenced) voices, subject positions/ templates for subjects,, subjectifications
- Discursive and non-discursive practices, templates for action (model practices)
- Dispositif of discourse production and intervention

Example of the Attribution of Interpretative Scheme (frame) and Utterance (Keller 1998)

“Branded as the most modern waste incineration works in Germany, if not in the world, a plant in Augsburg costing more than 900 million marks underwent a ‘warm start-up’ in the autumn of last year. Last week the trial run came to an abrupt end. For this words were used that newspaper readers know only with reference to nuclear reactors: cracks in a steam pressure-pipe, leaks in water pipes, quick shutdown. And of course: the legally permitted pollution output into the environment was not exceeded. One should not forget: all technology is subject to breakdowns – and the more complex it is, the more subject to breakdowns – a truism.”

- (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 5.5.94)



Phenomenal structure

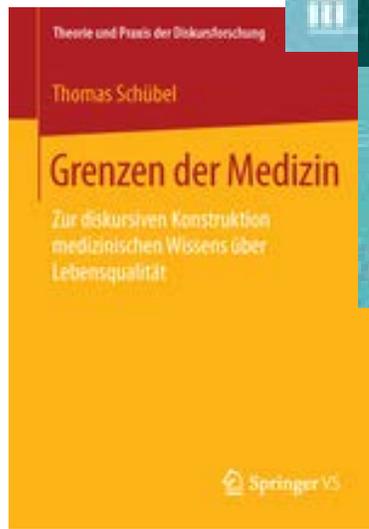
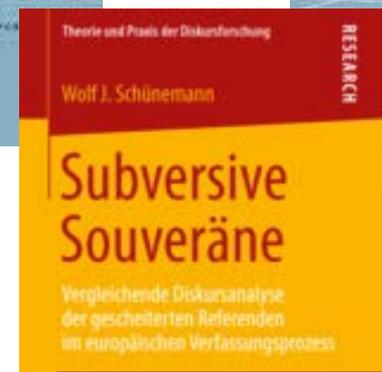
Administrative Waste discourse (F)

Dimensions	Concrete Implementation
Causes	<p>Waste as "sanitary issue"; discrepancy between amount produced and disposal or recycling infrastructure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wealth growth, economic and technical advances, consumption needs of the consumers -> rise in waste produced • Waste as a problem of deficient waste disposal at landfills • Waste as a problem of a lack of citizen responsibility and discipline • Waste as a problem of national payments balance/usage of raw materials • Waste as a problem of international competitive conditions
Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Politics/government/National administration (must develop and enforce a waste politics framework program in coordination with the economy) • Regional corporations, Economy (individual responsibility for the implementation of the political specifications) • Citizens/Society (giving up irrational fears and selfish denials; taking over responsibility for waste, acceptance of the technologies)
Need for action/ Problem-solving	<p>Low problem level; technical mastery of the waste issue is possible through recycling and elimination; guidelines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large-scale technological expansion and optimization of the disposal and recycling infrastructure • Obtaining acceptance of removal infrastructure through the use of communication und participation • comprehensive mobilization of citizens' responsibility (local authorities, economy, consumers)
Self-positioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representatives of the scientific-technical, economic, and pragmatic reason, of civil (socio-cultural/socio-technical) progress • Government as the administrator of the collective interest
Other-positioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • civil actors (regional corporations, economy, citizens) show a lack of consciousness for their responsibility, irrational fears, and suppression • Irrationalism and fundamentalism of German waste politics, disguise for economic protectionism
Culture of things/wealth model	<p>Not a topic of the waste discussion; follows seemingly "sacrosanct" modernization dynamics and market rationalities; material model of affluence; freedom of needs (production and consumption)</p>
Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government secures collective interests (affluence, progress, modernity) • (Actual and moral) cleanliness of the public space • Nature as (scarce national) resource, whose usage can be optimized • 'Society as it is right here and now' as realization of "good life"



Table 2: The public discursive field of legitimate statements and articulators in (West) Germany (discourse on waste) in the 1980s (some examples)

Actors (Articulators)	Structural-conservative discourse on waste (technological-ecological modernisation): better technology will solve all problems	culture-critical discourse on waste (political-ecological restructuring): change of cultural and economical model (way of life) necessary
politics/administration	<i>Discourse coalitions</i> *German Federal Government (ministry of economics) * (ministry * Federal states governments (Baden-Württemberg, Nordrhein-Westfalen) * Parties: * FDP * CDU/CSU * SPD * communities	<i>Discourse coalitions</i> of environmental issues) * Federal states governments (Niedersachsen, Hessen) * Parties: *SPD *Greens * communities
economy/ environmental associations	* interest associations of economic actors (BDI, DIHT, VCI) * important business companies * companies working in the waste business *trade	*environmental associations unions
experts	* scientific and administrative experts *federal en- *federal	* scientific and administrative experts vironmental office expert council for environmental issues *parliamentary office for technology assessment * NGO based research centres for environmental issues
media	*Some newspapers (like Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung)	*Some Newspapers (Süddeutsche Zeitung) *Some Newspapers and Journals (like DER SPIEGEL, Die ZEIT)



Recent commentators have begun to recognize not only the real breaks and paradigm-shifts, but also the affinities and continuities between older and newer traditions of work; for example, between Weber's classical interpretative 'sociology of meaning' and Foucault's emphasis on the role of the 'discursive'. [end of quote]

(Hall, Centrality of Culture, p. 224)