

Perception as a method of learning to observe and think

A Presentation for
XIII European Social Work Symposium, May 4th-7th, 2008

Ari Nieminen, Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Finland
ari.nieminen@laurea.fi

Introduction

Teaching research methods to students of social work can be a difficult task because social scientific methods are often presented in text books as abstract principles that are alien to everyday consciousness. In this presentation I argue that teaching research methods could begin with everyday perceptions and proceed from these perceptions to more elaborated methods of investigation. The presentation uses an example of a magazine cover (not included in this paper) and a general structure of understanding and analysing perceptions to make its point.

From Ethnography to Perception of the World

The history of this presentation goes back to winter 2006-2007 when Kari Eklund and I started to test using perception and ethnographic methods in social work education. In spring 2007 we (Kari Eklund, Ari Nieminen as well as students Ulla Vanhoja and Elina Ilvonen) presented our ideas XII European Social Work Symposium in Hungary. The title of our presentation was "Ethnographic view to social work - Practices and professional education". In winter 2007-2008 I started to write an article in Finnish about this theme and it seems now that this article will be broadened to a small book of less that 80 pages.

While writing the text my view to perception and ethnography as research methods changed considerably. In order to be able to understand and analyse perception as a method of acquiring information of the world I constructed a structure of perception and a structure of reflection of perception. I'd like to think that these structures are a short of phenomenological descriptions of what goes on when we perceive the world and reflect our knowledge about it.

I began to think that the structure of the reflection of perception could in fact be used as an approach of teaching wider analytical and intellectual skills than just research methods. In the next part of this presentation I am trying to proof this idea by presenting the structure of reflecting perception.

Structure of reflecting perception

The structure of reflecting perception includes at least the following elements or moments:

1. stimulus, sensation,
2. sensation is recognised and interpreted as something (perception),
3. tradition and history,
 - research methods: collecting data
 - studying and understanding history
4. analysis
 - research methods: methods of analysing qualitative and quantitative data
 - analysing diverse causes
5. critique,
 - world-view (Weltanschauung), values
6. synthesis
7. practice to which perception links
 - understanding knowledge as part of practice and applying it to practical tasks.

Even if the parts of structure of reflecting perception can be presented as a sequential process it must be kept in mind that the steps listed above constitute in practice integrated parts of a unitary process in which anticipation of practices to which perceptions are linked (point 7 above) form constitutive bases for sensing the world in a particular way (points 1 and 2 above). In this sense, the parts of the structure of reflecting perception can also be labelled as moments of the above constructed unity.

Does it Work in Practice?

As can be seen from above, everyday perception can be used while teaching research methods and methodologically conscious reflection of professional and other practices. It seems to me that the above presented approach has at least the following merits:

- The above scheme can be used both superficially and fast and with detail and considerable time. In principle, just about any short-term practical task or a study assignment includes the most of the elements of the structure of reflection of perception. Therefore, even limited learning assignments can profit from the above scheme. On the other hand, the above approach does function with large scale study objectives and research endeavours as well.
- This approach links well with diverse academic and philosophical traditions and offers a possibility of developing them further. These links include, for instance, connections with qualitative and quantitative methods of collecting and analysing data. Also intellectual traditions like Hegelian and Marxian approaches that begin with singular everyday observations and end up with large-scale synthesis of the modern society and economy (see Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit and its comment literature in Hegel 1983 and Marx's Capital I). In fact, many spiritual traditions assume that spiritual development

begins from everyday consciousness and develops to higher levels of abstraction and consciousness (see Bloch 1983, 863-864 and, for instance, Buddhist texts).

- This approach makes it possible to comprehend connections between (academic) knowledge and professional and socio-political practices.

However, this approach may have its weaknesses as well:

- This approach may still be too broad, complicated and abstract for practical purposes of social work education.
- Social workers are not supposed to broaden their thinking or activities beyond the limits of local social work. Who would have an interest in this kind of scheme of thinking and acting?

As far as I know the above kind of approach has not been tested in social work education. Therefore, its practical applicability remains open question at the moment.

Literature

This list includes a few books that I have used while writing a large article or a small book about theme of this presentation.

Bloch, Ernst. 1983. *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. In: Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. [1807] 1983: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Ullstein Materialien. Frankfurt/M, Berlin, Wien: Verlag Ullstein.

Goldstein, Bruce B. 2002. *Sensation and Perception*. Pasific Grove, California: Wadsworth.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. [1945] 1974. *Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co.

Waldenfels, Bernhard. 2004. *Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Wiesing, Lambert. 2002. Lambert Wiesing (ed.) *Philosophie der Wahrnehmung. Modelle und Reflexionen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.