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Chapter 10

How to Deal with “Doing Social Inequality” by “Doing Criminological (Qualitative) Research”



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Introduction

The connection between social inequality and criminology seems obvious if we take a step back and examine it from a distance: Is it not one of the most apparent findings of criminology that the lower classes commit most crimes? Is it not, then, subsequently inevitable that criminology would concern itself with those at the lower end of the income, wealth, and status spectrum? If things appear too obvious, though, one should be careful, especially if one's profession is that of a researcher. Indeed, criminology has mostly dealt with crimes and offenses committed by members of the lower social classes. Of course, there are major exceptions: Faria (2018), Erp et al. (2015), and Kölbel (2018), to name but a few, but to spell out the rule rather than pay tribute to the exceptions, we willfully and respectfully do not consider those here. But there has been a great deal of discussion about whether what we see is what we have normatively set the stage for. In other words, is the group currently experiencing incarceration the one that has, in fact, committed the most crimes? Or are they simply the group that has been normatively singled out for incarceration because the offenses they commit have been inscribed into law in such

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a way that incarceration becomes inevitable (cf. Neubacher & Bögelein, 2021; Wacquant, 2009)?

When considering the qualitative-criminological research history by looking at the work of the Chicago School (Newburn, 2007), the interest in the underclass becomes obvious. Regardless of whether deviance was framed as geographical disorganization (economically deprived neighborhoods) (Shaw & McKay, 1942), of unequal opportunity structures (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960), or as a subcultural practice (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967), it seemed to be the *social question* that guided criminological research. The *social question*, in short, is a socio-philosophical concept which addresses specific strains and burdens that affect the lower classes who depend on earnings; the *social question* looks for an answer, so to speak a solution for these specific problems (cf. Case, 2016). Research into deviant behavior among the underclass includes social differences in terms of participation, status, and agency. Foucault (1977) viewed these differences as an opportunity to sharply criticize criminological research. Garland (1992) took up Foucault's criticism of criminological research, arguing that it uses individual differentiations as a reason to legitimize measures of disciplining and asserting that criminological research had focused on differentiations to such an extent that this criticism could not be generalized. Garland was no more concerned with underestimating the normativity and power of criminological research than we are. But he showed in detail that criminology is not only a "disciplinary science" but also an expression of knowledge, which represents a generally valid understanding of deviance and delinquency (Garland, 1992, p. 420). We therefore want to elaborate a (reconstructive) qualitative approach to increase awareness of the participation of inequality structures in knowledge constitution and to show how this can be dealt with methodologically. Undoubtedly, criminological research contributes to powerful knowledge about individual differentiations and thus reproduces social structures of inequality, but the question that arises is: How should we deal with this as qualitative researchers with demands for self-reflexive and open research processes? If the latter is the case, criminological research is in danger of reproducing stereotypes and the very prejudices that have led to the view of crime and criminals as it is today. To avoid falling into that trap, we provide an analysis of the critical situations in any qualitative research process that might lead to the reproduction of "knowledge" and not to situations being analytically approached in a more detached and less involved way.

Therefore, we introduce the concept of "doing social problems" from a sociology of knowledge perspective and aim to point out the stages of the (qualitative) research process that might cause researchers to fall into the aforementioned trap. By introducing the concept of reconstructive research, we also provide an approach that helps researchers avoid this pitfall. It will be demonstrated that a concept other than those established in the labeling approach is needed to understand and analytically consider one's own entanglements in the reproduction of inequality structures by doing criminological research. Finally, our methodological suggestions will

show how we can learn from “doing” inequality by engaging in specific research practices and what it tells us about criminological discursive knowledge.¹

Introducing the Concepts of Social Inequality, Doing Social Problems, and Reconstructive Sociology

Social Inequality

Scholars have long questioned the origin of inequality between people (e.g., Dahrendorf, 1967). People are different, yet inequality becomes social inequality – and thereby relevant for social sciences – when people occupy different positions or have different access to opportunities because of their position in the societal structure or certain individual characteristics. Gender, for example, is initially no more than a difference. But when women are denied access to education or have lower earning opportunities, it becomes social inequality.² Thus, social inequality is preceded by a process of valuation; it is a product of social definitional processes and thus not immutable but subject to change. Following Weber, Dahrendorf (1967) explains the class position as one of authority, because opposing interests are, in principle, associated with the sponsorship or exclusion of positions of authority. In the case of the holders of authority, their interests become values. Dahrendorf sees the concept of interest as an analytical concept. He understands it as the structurally generated orientation of the behavior of the bearers of certain positions.

Dahrendorf (1967) relates to Marx and sees inequality because of domination; it is coercion that holds together a group as a structural unit. In Dahrendorf’s theory, the origin of social inequality lies in norms and sanctions. Power and authority necessarily come first because authority must exist so that valid norms can be established. First, there are an infinite number of values; those in charge select some of the values and translate them into norms. When these values – which are mainly in the interest of groups – become acknowledged as a common interest, this is described as hegemony, a concept introduced by Gramsci (Struck et al. 2020, 324). Conformity to norms is rewarded and the ability to conform depends on the social position. Deviations from the existing norms are referred to as deviant, delinquent, or criminal behavior and are sanctioned in various ways by “conforming” people. Geißler (1994) states that, according to the theory of class law, the ruling class has no interest in seeing those acts that are often committed by their own members

¹We refer with the term “doing inequality” to the ethnomethodological approach of “doing gender” by Garfinkel (1967), which was later further conceptualized by Kessler and McKenna (1978) with reference to the interactionist and dramaturgical approach by Goffman. In criminology, Messerschmidt (1995) has made a significant contribution to the relationship between “doing gender” and crime.

²The same would be true for people who do not identify as man or woman or who identify as transgender. But empirical research into this is yet missing.

sanctioned as strongly as those of the lower classes. Therefore, the ruling class practices appropriate penal legislation. So goes the theoretical argument. On closer inspection, it becomes clear that punishment and criminal labeling are carried out not only by the majority of society or by those who conform to values but also by those who have the social status and thus the power to enforce sanctions (Bourdieu, 1994).

Dahrendorf's (1967) approach to social inequality, like Marx's, includes two or more aggregates in this set of positions. On the one hand, there is an aggregate of positions that are in possession of legitimate power, which he calls "the ruling class." These are positive authority roles and represent coercive, controlling elements. The prevailing norms are projected onto this position as an expectation of behavior, and conformism is enforced by sanction. On the other hand, there is an aggregate of positions that are excluded from legitimate power, which is the lower class. Mirroring the other aggregate, the lower class assume negative authority roles, their orientation is to overcome the status quo, and they are expected to behave contrary to the prevailing norms. They are in forced or dominated positions. This division could also be called domination versus subordination or values versus interests, and this division plays a crucial role in the participation of different classes in crime. This is how – from our point of view – the connection between social inequality and crime plays out. To understand how certain kinds of crimes become a hot topic and how certain groups of criminals are singled out, we introduce the concept of doing social problems.

Doing Social Problems

The preoccupation with social problems goes back to the beginnings of North American sociology and Merton's (1976, p. 7) definition: "Social problems are the discrepancy between cultural standards, norms, or values and the actual conditions of social life, a discrepancy between what should be and what is." The sociology of social problems follows Merton's definition and tries to find an answer to the questions of who decides about the cultural standards in society, what determines the actual conditions of social life, and who determines the discrepancy between the two. It also questions whether such a decision is even possible – and how this is closely related to social inequality. Different theoretical positions, such as "objectivist," "realist," or "constructivist," pursue varying focal points and research interests.³ The smallest common denominator of these positions is the phenomenological comprehension of social problems. Thus, the term refers to social situations, conditions, and social behaviors that are perceived as negative – or that challenge societal standards, like crime (Groenemeyer, 2016). Two very different research styles concerning the study of social problems need to be distinguished:

³For a summary of theoretical issues in the study of social problems, see Best (2004).

1. The *etiological approach* explores the causes, conditions, and epidemiology of social problems and its best practice processing methods. In this sense, *social problems are seen as harms*, and theoretical and empirical models try to find the probable causes.
2. The *interactionist and constructivist approach* envisions *social problems as the result of interactionist definition processes*, by which a certain behavior is defined as something deviant in relation to social values and norms (e.g., Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967; Matza, 1964).⁴ The labeling approach⁵ (LA) in this framework is not etiologically oriented. The LA sees deviance not as a fixed term but as the process of attributing “deviance” to a certain kind of behavior and analyzes the attribution of norms to behavior.

This chapter presents a concept for understanding the construction of social problems that is situated in the second approach. The concept of social problems includes discourses as well as the meso- and macrolevels as units of investigation. These levels have been notably combined by German sociologist Axel Groenemeyer, who bases his concept of social problems on the analysis of institutions of social control and social assistance. However, we show how the concept can be extended to understand the role played by criminological research in shaping its object of investigation. “Doing social problems” is a multistage process that describes the application of rules, techniques, and knowledge to individual problems and difficult situations in institutions of social control and social assistance (e.g., measures for crime prevention) (Groenemeyer, 2012). Before problem categories can be successfully applied in everyday life, however, they must be successfully established in society.⁶ Certain behaviors and situations must first be collectively identified as problematic and then finally be addressed through political-administrative decisions (in the following, see Groenemeyer, 2010, pp. 15). As a result, organizations are generated to deal with such problems. Institutions of social control and social assistance take on a life of their own while processing. In the everyday life of professionals, problem-solving requires the use of specialized knowledge and techniques and presupposes certain orientations. In addition, professionals from social control institutions have their own experiences with the addressees and adapt their actions accordingly. This knowledge, along with public discourses, guides the everyday interactions between professionals and addressees. Even though this interaction is framed by power imbalances, the addressees are actively involved in problem categorization, for example, by positioning themselves in certain discourses,

⁴Particularly radical representatives of this approach see social problems exclusively as social constructions formed by discourses (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977).

⁵This approach has several different names, that is, control paradigm, reaction approach, definition approach, labeling theory.

⁶The classics of sociology of social problems have developed various multiphase “career” models for this purpose (see Fuller & Myers, 1941; Blumer, 1971; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977; Schetsche, 1996).

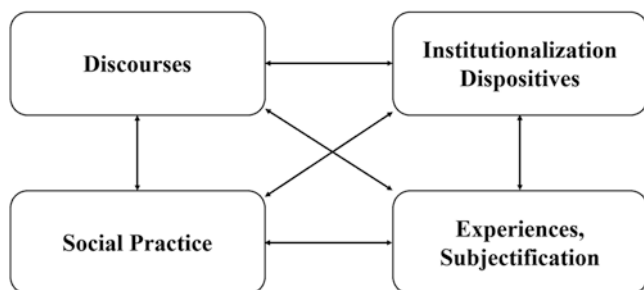


Fig. 10.1 Levels of analysis of problematization processes. (authors' depiction, see also Groenemeyer, 2014, p. 155)

subjectivizing them, or incorporating them into their biographical self-interpretations. Figure 10.1 illustrates the interaction of problematization processes.

Groenemeyer (2014) explicates four interdependent levels of problematization that can be integrated into criminological research. The first level means the discursive knowledge of crime, formed, for example, by the media, academia, offenders, and police officers. The second level addresses the institutions that are dealing with delinquency in different ways. Groenemeyer (2014, pp. 152ff.) was referring to institutions of social assistance and control, such as prevention projects, prisons, and probation services. We argue that criminological research institutions must be added to this list. In fact, this is the very purpose of this chapter. The third level focuses on practices of delinquency, such as any act that is interpreted as deviant or criminal (e.g., theft or dealing with illegal substances). Lastly, the fourth level conceptualizes the experiences of deviant people with their interpretation of their own deviant lifestyles. As the arrows in the figure illustrate, all levels are interrelated. In the following section, we concentrate on the levels “Discourses,” “Institutionalization,” and “Dispositives.” For this purpose, we briefly introduce the idea of the sociological analysis of knowledge by Keller (2011).

The Sociology of Knowledge

This methodology is influenced by Berger and Luckmann's (1967) sociology of knowledge and Foucault's discourse analysis. Its heuristic approach consists of the discursive production of knowledge and social reality, with simultaneous consideration of power structures. This means that actors are seen as producers of discourses and reality, while the social reality is prestructured by hegemonial discourses (Keller, 2011).

The sociology of knowledge analysis of discourse is concerned with reconstructing the processes which occur in social constructions, objectivization, communication, and the legitimization of meaning structures or, in other words, of interpretation and acting structures on the institutional, organizational or social actors' level. It is also concerned with the

analysis of the social effects of these processes. This includes various dimensions of reconstruction: sense making as well as subject formation, ways of acting, institutional/structural contexts, and social consequences. (Keller, 2011, p. 49)

Keller’s idea is rooted in a constructionist and interpretive tradition.⁷ The other position understands the sociology of knowledge, within a constructivist framework of thought, as the sociology of science and focuses on the specific processes of scientific knowledge production (e.g., Knorr-Cetina, 1983).⁸ Keller (2010) understands discursive knowledge as a systematic supply of socially constructed knowledge, which is solidified, objectified, and institutionalized to a certain degree.

From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, we propose considering scientific work as the basis and expression of the scientific construction of reality and investigating both the more or less institutionally stabilized discursive structuring and the contextually situated knowledge production of scientific action. (Keller & Poferl, 2020, p. 153⁹)

In other words, institutionally structured knowledge cultures prevail in empirical practice and are intertwined with knowledge generation. Keller and Poferl (2020) suggest distinguishing between discursive structuring and action orientation. Unfortunately, identifying as an academic with a critical attitude does not protect someone from reproducing the very problematizations one normally criticizes when engaging with them. Below, we explore this relationship on different levels and offer some thoughts on how to address this dilemma in research practice.

However, sensitized by these concepts and at various stages in our own research practice, we came to the realization that the way we conduct criminological research in Germany contributes to a specific knowledge of problematization. Following these considerations, we want to show how criminological research itself contributes to the knowledge of problematization and must be seen as a part of societal problematization processes. Therefore, we ask how social knowledge systems about crime and deviance are constituted and how we, as criminologists, contribute to them through our research practice. It is less a matter of explaining criminal behavior in individual cases, but rather of analyzing reasons and ways of problematizing certain practices described as criminal that go beyond micro-sociological labeling theories.

⁷For a historical overview of the overlapping developments of interpretivist and constructionist theories regarding the sociology of deviance, see Nichols (2019). Although the sociology of social problems in the international arena has gained a constructivist strand through Kitsuse and Spector (1977), the otherwise far-reaching work of Berger and Luckmann (1967) on the sociology of knowledge has hardly been received (Keller & Poferl, 2020, p. 143).

⁸In the English-speaking world in particular, the sociology of knowledge is linked to feminist and postcolonial approaches to “situatedness” (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2003; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) and its connection to the Marxist tradition of “*Seinsgebundenheit*” or “materiality,” which means being determined by social being in a strictly determinist meaning (Keller & Poferl, 2020, p. 143).

⁹Translation by Katharina Leimbach.

Reconstructive Sociology

Now that we have worked out a social theoretical positioning in detail, the question arises as to how to methodically deal with knowledge about the co-constitution of social problems. For us, the solution lies in the principle of a reconstructive research attitude. Only reconstructive methods have the potential to make one's own entanglements visible, on the one hand, and to take them into account analytically, on the other. We argue for the consistent application of a truly reconstructive approach when doing criminological research. To our understanding, this is the way to overcome the reproduction of stereotypical knowledge.

The common ground of the qualitative approaches explained previously is the interpretive paradigm that social reality is not simply something that “is there” and can be measured “as it is.” This paradigm takes social reality as constructed by acts of interpretation. Research following this paradigm considered its task to explain the underlying acts of interpretation, rather than objectively given facts (cf. Lamnek, 2010, p. 34). Based on a Weberian-inspired interpretive cultural sociology (Weber, 1980 [1920]), it seeks to attribute cultural realities to individuals' social interpretations. The interpretive paradigm offers scope to the actor when interpreting his/her everyday life. There is no cognitive consensus on “how the world is” – the interpretation of symbols determines their meaning. In line with the interpretive paradigm, researchers state the subjectivity of social realities and understand that both interacting research partners (the researcher and the person who is the data giver) have diverging backgrounds when it comes to sense making. Symbolic interactionism understands the reciprocity of actions and how actors are never isolated beings but entangled in intersubjective relations and contexts. Communication is based on symbols, and the most powerful and widely used symbol is language – although it is, at the same time, “conceivably unsuitable” (cf. Kruse, 2015, p. 28¹⁰) – as it is never clear but usually ambiguous. Not only symbols are ambiguous, but norms and values are too. Any kind of meaning is created in a process of interaction, which is why qualitative researchers often speak of co-producing data rather than of collecting data. Meaning is underlying change and evolves over time. Research is perceived as communication (that is why we wonder how we do social inequality by doing criminological research). Reconstructive researchers see their interviewee/participant as a partner in the research process (Lamnek, 2010). “While qualitative research examines what can be seen in the everyday life, reconstructive approaches explore the foundations as the framework of these events. What structures these approaches and what structures their manifestation as objectifications, regardless of their aims and the intentions of those involved?” (Garz, 2007, p. 225; cited in Kruse, 2015, p. 25¹¹).

¹⁰Translation by Nicole Bögelein.

¹¹Translation by Nivene Raafat.

How Specific Criminological Knowledge Is Produced

To reconnect the concepts of social inequality and social problems with criminological research, it helps to turn to Smaus (1986), who emphasizes the unequal distribution of power among different classes in terms of the relative power of criminal justice authorities. To her, real negotiation takes place only in the middle class, whereas criminality is simply assigned to the lower class. And morality activated in interaction is expressed in the evaluation of a bad attitude, which is usually displayed by the lower class. A “bad attitude” in this context is one that “underperforms” the average routines that apply in a situation according to middle-class standards. Meeting these expectations, again, has different effects; while this is rewarded for middle-class members, it is not for a person belonging to a lower class. In Smaus’ eyes, general morality shows the basic structure of society; for example, the prohibition of any physical confrontation is aimed at the “class dangereuse,” which must appear physically dangerous because it performs (badly paid) physical labor. To untangle the interconnection between class and criminology, we scrutinize, in the following paragraphs, specific research examples that illustrate the previously abstract theoretical considerations. What is it that criminological research – at least in Germany, but also in other parts of the world – typically focuses on? Here are a few examples.

When crime is discussed and researched, the focus is usually on men – but not male managers, male politicians, or other men belonging to the upper class. It is mostly *men from a lower class* who face multiple problems in their lives. Why is this? It might have to do with the way criminology accesses its participants. In most cases, when researchers want to learn about drug dealing, they will head to a prison and ask to speak to a person who is imprisoned for a related offense (as was done by Bögelein & Meier, 2018; Dickinson & Wright, 2015; Fleetwood, 2014; Moeller & Sandberg, 2015). The same happened in the “Radicalization within the Digital Age” research alliance, to which both authors belonged, albeit in different sub-projects, when wanting to find out more about radicalization processes. One of the two authors is again involved in a new governmental research project, which aims to conduct interviews with offenders from organized crime groups in prison. What happens here can be criticized by drawing on the labeling approach. Researchers make use of labels that were meted out by criminal justice agencies, and by talking only to persons who have been tagged as “criminals,” research reproduces, and possibly reinforces, power relations and stereotypes that have long endured. Furthermore, this definition created by others does not necessarily correspond to the actors’ self-definition. Despite reflections on this in a chapter, it will still be written that “research found out that...” or “studies have demonstrated what criminal justice agencies see...” All of this happens often with the best of intentions, but when not reflected in depth, it has serious consequences for the understanding of the phenomenon and possibly for opportunities available to some to live their lives later – maybe affecting a whole group of people.

For the longest time, the discipline reproduced *gender stereotypes* by studying men and their criminal behavior. If women were looked at, it was usually to show the otherness: to look at gender differences, at how women's crime is different. The legal professions did so by imagining a "reasonable man" who became a "supposedly gender-neutral legal abstraction with male status" (Naffine, 2016 [1987], p. 4). All this was accompanied by studies that simply looked at differences in female behavior but not at differences in constructing females or at women (for criticism, see Sharp & Haley, 2007). This has changed little over the past few years when it comes to mainstream criminology. When studying prisons, researchers implicitly state that there is cohesion and community among women, without making this claim explicit (for critique, see Neuber, 2020). Due to their small numbers (regularly, no more than 6% of prisoners are female in most European countries), female prisoners are often treated as an appendix to male prisons. The path into prison is often described as one usually connected with victimization and trauma, thus showing women's fates to be determined by circumstance and allowing for no self-efficacy, which usually describes male prisoners' criminal pathways (for a critical overview, see Neuber, 2020). Qualitative research would benefit by embracing an ethnomethodological approach (cf. Micus-Loos, 2018) that realizes that gender is not something someone is or has, but something one *does*: It is the very performative dimension of gender itself that is of interest. Something that helps here is the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" (cf. Connell, 1995), which states that masculinity is a "position in gender relations" and questions the practices through which men fulfill it. Hegemonic masculinity is a cultural concept that includes male dominance, a complementary and hierarchical division of labor, and heterosexuality as the main orientation pattern of male practices. Perhaps, male violent behavior is best understood as one that follows this pattern, and violence occurs to secure dominance. At the heterosocial level, it is to preserve the dominance of men over women. Violence is thus a means to assure and demonstrate one's masculinity. Consequently, female violence often stands in opposition to traditional roles of femininity. In stressful biographical experiences or in adolescent conflicts, it is used to ward off powerlessness, devaluation, and humiliation (cf. Micus-Loos, 2018).

When not aware of circumstances and overarching paradigms, such as institutionalized racism, studies might incorporate the very cause in their explanations, for example, when studies on sentencing disparities between nationals and nonnationals explain the differences with prior convictions, which were, in fact, caused by institutionalized racism (for a critical assessment, see Murukama & Beckett, 2010). The same might occur in the fields of radicalization and organized crime studies: When investigating these areas, the very prejudices leading to criminalization might end up being factors that researchers rediscover.

The same happens when we access radicalized people in prison to better understand the process. By doing so, researchers again apply concepts from others (e.g., researchers, policy makers, police officers, judges) to the radicalization process; especially when speaking to people who were considered by others to be radicalized into Islam, this proved to be quite problematic (Larsen, 2019; Leschkar, 2019). Going via gatekeepers who work for exit programs allows us to learn what

practitioners see as they lead us to those people who have shown an interest in or were pointed to their programs. Any definition of “radicalism” or “danger” is unfailingly political and needs to be set in relation to the interests of national security agencies (cf. this part in Meier et al., 2021). “Radicalization” can be described as a “hegemonial paradigm” due to its normativity (cf. Jukschat & Leimbach, 2019, p. 11). “Radicalized” individuals are constructed as a problematic group (see Coppock & McGovern, 2014; Leimbach, 2019), and deradicalization and exit programs are often rooted in neoliberal governmentality practices (see Elshimi, 2015). Engaging in research with people who have been labeled or who self-identify as “radical” means having to concern oneself with this label.

Another aspect is how research often follows public calls for funding and, thereby, a “*political claim making*” (cf. Bögelein et al., 2021). By doing so, researchers tend to focus on what policymakers identify as a “hot topic.” Examples of this are radicalization (especially Islamist radicalization). Researchers in these situations embrace these topics and create a body of literature. This body of literature can then be used as “proof” to co-create a reality.

To return to our argument, we understand that criminological research necessarily needs to be aware of the potential harm of doing social inequality. And, as the saying goes, the only way out is right through. Researchers will not be able to overcome or ignore this; therefore, they need to apply a great deal of openness, reflexivity, and reconstruction to understand and learn about their field of interest. It is crucial to not only start analysis when interview transcripts are there but also reflect all structures that make themselves known in the process: How open or clandestine is the field? Is it easy to learn about it or must one engage with specific experts to understand more? Are those involved in the field reluctant to speak to researchers? Or are they open as they have nothing more to lose? All these stages must be considered before discussions are even held with the first interviewee and need to be part of the analysis in a reconstructively designed research project.

Conclusion: The Need to Strive for a Sensitive Approach – And Work on Our Limitations

As we have shown, it is impossible to fully eliminate the promotion of stigmatization through criminological research. Nevertheless, from an ethical point of view, it is particularly important to involve the people who have been labeled as deviants in the discussion about crime and to thereby respect their rights and citizenship (this argument stems from poverty research, cf. Kloss, 2021). Through the empirical examples taken from our research practice, we have been able to show that the reproduction of social inequality is often already inherent in the way scholars research deviance. Hitzler and Honer (1997, pp. 23–25), in the style of SKAD’s research tradition, pointed out: “The basic problem for the sociological researcher when he or she is reflecting upon his/her work, is making it transparent for him- or herself and for others how (s)he understands that which (s)he believes to

understand, and how (s)he knows what (s)he thinks (s)he knows.” As we can see, the SKAD demands more than the usual reflexivity of qualitative research processes. The way we problematize through our research practices is embedded in and shaped by specific social knowledge. Starting from Groenemeyer’s (2014) concept, it is important to understand how problematizations are successfully enforced and thus become general social problems. If it is further assumed that criminological knowledge legitimizes disciplinary measures such as incarceration (Foucault, 1977), then this will be inevitably included in empirical investigation. Our aim is to make clear not only that criminological research is itself a power-stabilizing practice, as Foucault (1977) said, but also that the knowledge we seek to generate about social deviance and delinquency is guided by established bodies of knowledge and cultural and political horizons of relevance. Reconstructive methodologies, in combination with the socio-theoretical positioning proposed here, make it possible to understand research practices as (partial) objectifications that already tell us something about the problematization and thus also about the problem itself: criminological knowledge formation and epistemologies are scientific constructions of reality. We must ask ourselves to what extent central (in the sense of much received) research results in the field point to hegemonic discourses, how our concrete research practices are influenced by them, and what form of knowledge do we produce. With the core principles of interpretive qualitative methods (meaning, context, interpretation, understanding, and reflexivity) (Keller & Clarke, 2018, p. 57), the tools are offered to answer these questions. But a shift is needed because there are social theoretical concepts that allow sensitization to the interdependencies of the nature of scientific knowledge formation and social reality. Thus, if it is assumed that problematizations are due to complex processes of construction and interpretation, then these must be reconstructed to be understood. We therefore propose an understanding (“*Verstehen*”) of research practice that elevates one’s own involvement in the construction of reality to the analytical object.¹² Because criminological knowledge is powerful, we consider it indispensable for researchers to become more sensitive to interdependencies, complexities, and entanglements in future research. We hope to generate a discourse on how an understanding of research practice can be further elaborated into a methodological concept.

Researchers need to reflect what structures they make use of and what normative settings have influenced their very setup. Such an approach means that, from the beginning, even regarding the design of data collection, researchers avoid getting stuck in reproductions and sameness. Only when applying a genuine reconstructive approach will research be open to the problems of existing structures of knowledge and eventually be able to look behind the scenes. One of the main ingredients for

¹²There are other approaches to include marginalized voices into the debate. O’Neill (2017, p. 91) suggests participatory research that include the taking of pictures, walking. She states that especially in research on humans who seek for asylum, “[w]alking and biographical methods together with visual methods helped to explore the experience of ‘being in place’ (...) eliciting dialogue, biographical remembering and relational, embodied engagement.”

this kind of research is understanding the meaning that actors attribute to their actions or motives (“*Verstehen*”) in the field.

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