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Interpretative study of concepts as a methodological alternative in the field of organization and management research

Our paper describes and defines the methodology of the interpretative study of concepts, in particular, from the perspective of the organization and management research. The basic assumption of this paper draws on the idea that concepts can only be understood as contextual ones. Their meaning is bound to the use and situational context, the idea that needs to be taken into consideration when interpreting them. In binding the text – the concepts and their definitions – into its context the original and the usage context are distinguished. The original context can be understood as the identification of the questions, answering which the text has been written for. The usage context, on the other hand, refers to the context, in which the text is interpreted. The same text has thus different meanings in different contexts.

In general, interpretative research has been stepping forward and legitimating in the field of organization and management research since the 1980's. However, writing has mainly concentrated on an empirical interpretative research, whereas the purpose of the interpretative study of concepts is to find meanings included into concepts and their definitions. Its objective is to interpret these meanings in the light of a chosen theoretical perspective. The theoretical perspective thematises the research problem, since it is possible to interpret the concepts and their definitions from a numerous different perspectives.

The data of the interpretative study of concepts consists of concepts and their definitions in the organization and management literature. It is about the written texts and concepts and the researcher does not interact personally with the producer of the data. The data can be termed as natural, since it exists regardless of the researcher. The research process of the interpretative study of concepts is a hermeneutic circle, which in principle is a never-ending circle or spiral. However, as far as practical research is concerned, there comes a point where the researcher has to break down the process of continuing interpretation and has to report the "best possible" interpretation. Finally, in this paper, we divide the interpretative study of concepts into four categories, i.e. heuristic, theory-bounded, descriptive and critical interpretative study of concepts.