An Intermediate Conclusion – Potentials of Artefact Analysis for the Field of International VET Research

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Abstract

Context: Sometimes international Vocational Education and Training (VET) research has to delve deep into cultural context in order to understand the reasoning and action of individuals related to training and work. The project Cultural Practice of Non-Academic Work in Mexico (KuPraMex), funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), explores social representations of non-academic work in Mexico using the analysis of non-visual and visual cultural artefacts (Bohnsack, 2008; Lueger, 2010; Lueger & Froschauer, 2018). This approach is currently discussed by disciplines such as the social sciences. Although the analysis of artefacts, within the scope of sociological theory formation, is rather a marginal phenomenon (Lueger & Froschauer, 2018), its relevance for theorising cannot be negated (Lueger, 2010). Artefacts are put into the material world by people and therefore represent the practices through which they were created. On the other hand, their creation is not without effects on the social world (Lueger & Froschauer, 2018).

Approach: For this reciprocity, artefact analysis seems an attractive way to analyse complex interactions between individuals, social structures, and cultural contexts in foreign societies. Within the project KuPraMex a comprehensive analysis of visual as well as non-visual artefacts is carried out, related to the cultural context of Mexico, in order to analyse prevailing connotations, images, etc. of non-academic work. In the words of Moscovici (Moscovici, 1988), the aim is to identify the circulating social representations. On the grounds of this, the potential of artefact analysis for cultural sensitive studies in foreign VET-systems like Mexico will be discussed.

Findings: In the context of the above-mentioned project, it was possible to get an impression regarding the central core of social representations (Abric, 1993) of non-academic work by analysing artefacts such as tele-novelas, films, memes, murals or novels. With the help of theoretically-based analysis schemes about social formations of labour, as well as open minded search for *in situ* findings, the international project team was able to extract core hypotheses about social representation of non-academic work in various working fields.

Conclusion: The core hypotheses about work deduced from circulating narratives and representations found in cultural artefacts proved to be very helpful for the next steps in the project. Especially in pandemic times when it is impossible to travel to a country to get familiar with the research context, the analysis of reports, scientific literature and cultural artefacts can be helpful to familiarise oneself with a unknown context. This way of approaching a (partly) unknown research context seems to open up a more holistic view of a cultural context. Due to this multi perspective approach a certain degree of cultural awareness for the scientist can be

expected. Moreover, it can support the development of meaningful survey instruments. However, as each method has its limits, it makes sense to combine artefact analysis with other methods, such as interviews. Overall, it can be concluded that the analysis of artefacts holds great potential for culturally sensitive international VET research and – in combination with other methods – it contributes to a deeper understanding of culturally shaped meanings and values.

Keywords

vocational education training, VET, non-academic work, cultural artefacts, social representation

1 Introduction

Investments in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) pay off for national economies – this is shown, for example, by the effects of TVET on the reduction of youth unemployment, the reduction of transaction costs in personnel recruitment, or on the integration of labour into the formal labour market. At the same time, positive effects can be observed at the micro level, such as higher income and employment security (Almeida et al., 2015; Cáceres-Reebs & Schneider, 2013; Fuchs et al., 2020; Icardi, 2021; OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2019). Due to the aforementioned advantages and the positive experience already gained with dual training, the area of vocational education and training in Mexico was expanded after a pilot phase to include the so-called Modelo Méxicano de Formación Dual (MMFD). The MMFD is based on the German model of dual training, although it has been adapted or "tropicalised" to the cultural context (Cáceres-Reebs & Schneider, 2013). It has already been implemented in some regions of the country (Fuchs et al., 2020; Wiemann, 2020).

Although TVET programmes are seen as having great potential, the demand for vocational education and training among the Mexican population is relatively low. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the enrolment rate in TVET programmes in Mexico is 38.2%, below the average of 45.7% (OECD, 2019). The question therefore arises as to the possible reasons for the low demand for such non-academic[1] training programmes.

The project Cultural Practice of Non-Academic Work in Mexico (KuPraMex), funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), focuses on the socially shared and culturally anchored notions, images, ideas, theories, perceptions or 'social representations' (Moscovici, 1988) of work. Social representations can manifest themselves in narratives, practices of action, but also in cultural artefacts (Schützeichel, 2007). Thus, in the context of the project, different data are included and examined. In addition to interviews, cultural artefacts such as pictures, books, films, etc. are also analysed.

In recent years, the relevance of cultural artefacts for the generation of theories has been thematised and discussed in various scientific disciplines, such as the social sciences. Accordingly, methodological approaches to their analysis have been developed (Froschauer, 2009; Lueger, 2010; Lueger & Froschauer, 2018). Existing methods within the framework of the so-called 'visual turn' (Boxenbaum et al., 2018), such as the documentary method, were also expanded to include the possibility of examining films and photos (Bohnsack, 2008).

Although the analysis of cultural artefacts is said to have great potential because the method is applied where language-based procedures, such as qualitative interviews, reach their limits, Lueger and Froschauer (2018) note a certain reluctance to use this methodological approach in the social sciences. In the field of German-language VET research, there are initial studies that

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[1] In this context, work in production, agriculture, health, tourism and other services or administration that requires competences not acquired at universities is included under the umbrella term of non-academic work.

examine the influence of series and new media on the career aspirations of young people (Berding et al., 2020; Jahncke et al., 2020). However, such studies are currently still the exception. This applies accordingly to international VET research. This paper will therefore outline the methodological approach of KuPraMex and explore the question of what potential the analysis of cultural artefacts holds for international VET research.

2   Cultural Artefacts and the Social World

There is no definitional agreement on the concept of culture, but it always refers to what has been created by humans – in the entire diversity of forms of expression (Nünning, 2009). Accordingly, objects created or processed by humans are also part of the respective culture. As a consequence, a cultural artefact can be understood as objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983) due to its materiality. Its creation, use or modification occurs - consciously or unconsciously – through human practices (Lueger & Froschauer, 2018). Accordingly, cultural artefacts are "[...] materialised products of human action that represent objectifications of social relations and social conditions" (Lueger, 2010, p. 92; translated by author).

Given this, cultural artefacts reveal something about the circumstances of their production. Once placed in the material world, cultural artefacts, due to their diversity and omnipresence, have effects on the social world. In this context, we can therefore also speak of a reciprocity of subject and object, whereby the reading of cultural artefacts depends on the incorporated cultural capital of the recipients (Bourdieu, 1983). Thus, socially shared notions, images, ideas, theories and perceptions or 'social representations' which is the term the social psychologist Moscovici (1988) would apply in this context.

Moscovici's concept "[…] concern[s] the contents of everyday thinking and the stock of ideas that gives coherence to our religious beliefs, political ideas and the connections we create as spontaneously as we breathe. They make it possible for us to classify persons and objects, to compare and explain behaviours and to objectify them as parts of our social setting" (Moscovici, 1988, p. 214).

He considers social representations as a part of social organisation that also frame individuals' perceptions of social structures and performative actions. Moreover, these are also always context-dependent and an expression of cultural beliefs, symbols and values. Social representations are dynamic entities that are actualised through performative acts. simultaneously, they have a certain degree of autonomy regarding the production of meaning (Moscovici, 1988; Schützeichel, 2007). In different wording, social representations to some extent "have a life of their own" (Moscovici & Duveen, 2001). Furthermore, social representations are said to have the function of transforming the unknown into the known, which refers to the process of "anchoring" (Moscovici, 1988; Araya Umaña, 2002).

Against the background that social representations combine contradictory characteristics, the concept sometimes appears paradoxical. These are rigid and fluid at the same time, which is why Abric (1993) split them into peripheral elements and a central core. Peripheral elements are related to individual experiences and characterised by fluidity, instability, etc. In addition, the peripheral elements form an interface between the outside world and the central core, while at the same time acting as a protective shield, preserving the central core from change to a certain extent. For example, repeated experiences or profound influences that differ from the central core can change it. In an overall sense, though, the central core of social representations is marked by relatively stability. Therefore, KuPraMex focuses primarily on the central core of social representations, which is assumed to manifest itself in cultural artefacts. Thus, from the analysis of cultural artefacts, clues to their circumstances of origin can be derived and the core of social representations can be approached. In view of this, and because of their diversity, reciprocity and omnipresence, the analysis of cultural artefacts seems particularly attractive, which is why a possible approach is presented below.

3 Methodological Approach to Artefact Analysis

The analysis of cultural artefacts is qualitatively oriented and – unlike document analysis – focuses less on texts than on objects. Due to their reciprocity, diversity and omnipresence, cultural artefacts offer significant advantages for social science theory building. At the same time, the aspect of omnipresence of cultural artefacts presents researchers with the dilemma of selection. Although cultural artefacts are objects created by human practices, they are considered "natural" data in the research context. This is because cultural artefacts find their way into the material world without any influence on the part of the researchers. Moreover, due to their physical presence, they are characterised by permanent availability, which favours a circular process of interpretation (Froschauer, 2009).

In terms of conducting high-quality artefact analysis, Lueger and Froschauer (2018) postulate the following conditions of successful research:

- group interpretation
- comprehensive interpretation of meaning with a critical attitude
- avoidance of time pressure
- consideration of reflection loops
- circular research process
- consistent integration of further artefacts

In addition, they distinguish seven different levels of artefact analysis (see Table I). However, these cannot be stringently separated from each other, as there tends to be overlaps in practical application. Accordingly, the systematisation of the levels of analysis represents a heuristic instrument to consider as many facets as possible as well as the complexity of an artefact (Lueger & Froschauer, 2018).

Table I

Levels of artefact analysis (Lueger & Froschauer, 2018, p. 65; translated by author)

Levels of Analysis of Artefacts		
Research Context of the Artefact Analysis	Research Interest Integration into the Research Process Specification of the Artifact Analysis	
Conditions of Existence of the Artefact	Reasons for Existence Conditions for Existence	
Descriptive Analysis	Materiality Inner Structure Contextual Characteristics	
Everyday Contextual Embedding of Meaning	Social Meanings Involved Actors Situated Context Analysis	Core Scope of Interpretation
Distanced-Structural Analysis	Production Artefact Handling Effects & Functions Scenic & Social Integration	
Comparative Analysis	Comparable Artefacts Typical Artifact Contexts Linkage with Further Analytical Procedures	
Summary of the Artefact Analysis	(Re-) Construction of the Artefact Context with Regard to the Cognitive Interest	

With regard to the levels described, Lueger and Froschauer (2018) formulate numerous exemplary questions that can be addressed to a cultural artefact. However, the authors emphasise that the proposed methodological approach is a generalisation. Consequently, further

specifications or adaptations are required in accordance with the respective research project. Therefore, the concrete implementation of KuPraMex is outlined below.

4 Concrete Implementation of the Artefact Analysis at KuPraMex

With regard to the concrete implementation of the artefact analysis in the KuPraMex[2] project, the questions formulated by Lueger and Froschauer (2018) partly functioned as orientation frames, whereby the focus was primarily on questions of the core scope of interpretation.
The analysis of cultural artefacts was carried out using four work steps, whereby recurrent phases of group interpretation were established and institutionalised (Froschauer, 2009; Lueger, 2010; Lueger & Froschauer, 2018). On the one hand, group interpretation and the joint reconstruction of the symbolic meaning were intended to meet the challenge of making the different approaches comparable in view of the diversity of the artefacts. On the other hand, interpretation in groups is considered a quality-assuring feature in qualitative social research (Reichertz, 2013). Finally, the perceptual structure of each individual depends on the respective context of origin, socialisation, social positioning as well as secondary characteristics such as age, gender, etc. (Bourdieu, 1987). In this context, we also speak of situatedness, whereby the instrument of group interpretation serves to reduce the so-called blind spots as much as possible (Kleemann et al., 2009).

4.1 Work step I

In the first work step, a pre-selection of cultural artefacts was made by the individual project members. In this context, those cultural artefacts were selected that contained narratives or representations about non-academic work, such as films, memes, etc., tools from work contexts were not included in this analysis. However, the research was not limited to any specific type of artefact, as there was uncertainty before the research began as to whether and to what extent the topic of non-academic labour would be included in Mexican cultural artefacts. Related to the research on cultural artefacts, Mexican film rankings, studies, etc., were included and checked to see if they made work the subject. In this context, cultural artefacts were reviewed, discussed, selected and pre-interpreted within the binational research group to ensure that only significant artefacts were analysed for the purpose of the study.

Particularity:

Already in the first step, the researchers noticed that the artefacts that seemed relevant were mainly produced by male persons, which is why a male perspective on the topic opened up.

4.2 Work Step II

In the second step – as suggested by Lueger and Froschauer – a further phase of narrowing down and selection along the lines of the research question was carried out. In addition to general non-academic activities, work in the areas of administration, gastronomy, tourism and metallurgy was to be focussed on. Another selection criterion related to the production of the respective cultural artefact. According to the criteria established in the project, the producer of the object had to be from Mexico or very familiar with the cultural context. This was to ensure that the mode of representation and narratives about non-academic work were framed according to the cultural context. Other selection criteria applied to the analysis material are listed below.

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[2] In addition to the author, Prof. Dr Ute Clement, Prof. Dr Stefan Gold, Prof. Dr Lydia Raesfeld, Dr Paola García Fuentes, Francisco Padilla Reyeros and Allistair Fritz López Mercado are involved in the project as an interpretation group. In the following, we will refrain from a comprehensive presentation of the results and instead refer to the article "Social Representation of Non-Academic Work in Mexico in the Light of Cultural Artefacts", which will be published by IJRVET.

The artefact:

- has a certain range[3],
- recurs in other contexts (recurrence),
- contains intertextual passages[4],
- is up-to-date, and/or
- occupies a place in collective memory[5].

Not every single one of these criteria were visible in all the artefacts studied, but they had to be at least predominantly fulfilled in order to justify the integration of an artefact into the study corpus.

Particularity:

In the course of this work step, it became apparent that some fields are surprisingly little represented in cultural artefacts, such as metallurgy. The cultural artefacts found usually only touched on the field of metallurgy or referred more generally to the role of the industrial worker. Moreover, they were often not very topical, while the administrative field, for example, was frequently addressed in a variety of ways. The great differences in the quantity and density of the narratives and representations contained in cultural artefacts is due to the characteristic of 'naturalness'. Finally, researchers do not influence the production of cultural artefacts.

4.3   Step III

Due to the diversity and heterogeneity of the cultural artefacts included, it seemed necessary to develop different patterns of analysis in the third work step (see Table II). The development of the analysis patterns was oriented – as already indicated – to the guiding questions proposed by Lueger and Froschauer (2018), but also to the German vocational concept of *Beruf*, which functioned as a contrasting foil to non-academic work (Clement, 1999; Kutscha, 2008; Matthes & Vicari, 2018). This narrowing of the content was done, on the one hand, against the background of the question posed at the outset about the relatively limited reach of dual training concepts in Mexico, but also because the German model of qualified skilled work and vocationality seemed analytically promising. The aspects associated with professionalism in Germany refer to aspects of work that also play a structure-forming role in classical professions or academic work. In this respect, we believe they are also suitable for systematically recording and mirroring social representations of work from other cultural backgrounds.

In addition, the conceptual considerations of Pries (2019) on the (power) field of gainful employment were included. The contrasting of non-academic work and the German vocational concept of *Beruf* resulted in specific questions that were added to the analytical frameworks. Furthermore, depending on the type of artefact in question, the development of analytical patterns was oriented towards other disciplines. For example, art-scientific methods offered an adequate framework for the analysis and interpretation of murals (Held & Schneider, 2007). Table II shows an example of an analysis pattern for filmic material.

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[3]   This was determined, for example, on the basis of cinema rankings, views on the Internet, etc.

[4]   Intertextual passages appear relevant in this context because they too can provide insight into the social relevance, reach, etc. of other cultural artefacts.

[5]   According to Erll (2017), this concept has become one of the most discussed in cultural studies memory research. Assmann's (1988) concept of collective memory is constituted by communicative and cultural memory. In this context, the approach of collective memory is not explored further. However, the temporal dimension is taken up by anticipating that collective memory is implied by knowledge shared collectively across generations. In this regard, the work of Fortino Mario Alfonso Moreno Reyes' alias 'Cantinflas' should be mentioned, for example. He and his work are still highly valued in Mexican society today. For example, other cultural artefacts have taken him up as a theme in terms of the criterion of intertextuality.

Table II

Example of an analysis pattern for filmic material (elaboration KuPraMex[6])

Title:
Author:
Year:
Genre:
Entire Duration:
Exact Location of Finding:
Is work somehow a subject of discussion/ visualised in the material?
Which sectors (e.g., tourism, gastronomy, metal technology, administration, etc.) are focused in the material?
Describe the scene or the scenes referring to the following questions/topics!
(always mention the exact minute and duration for every scene)
Work Tasks
What does the person do?
What kind of problems is she or he facing?
How significant/critical are these problems for others/for society?
What is the risk/the worst outcome if problem solution fails?
Who has interests in solving/not solving the problem? Who is involved in the working process?
*How are the **Work Tasks** structured?*
(Highlight the appropriate term)
Holistic Fragmented
Complex Simple
Problematic Task Routinized
Contextualised Standardised
Socially Relevant Exploitation Interest
Competencies
Which knowledge does the working person show?
What is she or he able to do? How are skills described or visible?
On the base of which external signs/symbols do others recognize the competencies of this person?
Where does the know-how or skills find limits?
Habitus
What is the working person proud of?
How does their identity get visible?
Which conditions/communication form does he or she accept? Which not?
Which physical, verbal or physical expression does the identity of the working person show?
Which traditions become visible?
Working Conditions
Which context conditions are visible, e.g. in terms of recruitment, pay, contractual basis, employment status, hierarchical position, promotion opportunities, gender etc.?
Institutions
Which institutions does the working person belong to? Which memberships are shown?

With the help of the analysis patterns, it was possible to focus on specific aspects contained in the cultural artefacts and to reduce the complexity of the content, while at the same time creating a common starting point for the analysis in binational teams of two.

Particularity:

Like other qualitative methods, the analysis of cultural artefacts proves to be time-consuming, especially because the concretised interpretation method depends on the respective artefact type. The aspect of diversity made cross-artefact comparisons difficult. The use of analysis patterns and the instrument of group interpretation was intended to overcome this problem by comparing the reconstructions resulting from the artefacts with each other.

However, the use of analysis patterns also followed further research pragmatic considerations. Thus, specifically contained modes of representation and narratives and not the entire

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[6] The development of the analysis patterns goes back to Professor Ute Clement.

diversity of content in the artefact were to be focussed on. In addition, the interpretative work in the binational team of two was only made possible by the patterns of analysis, because it was relatively clear before the start what was to be paid attention to in the cultural artefacts. The interactions between the researchers proved to be essential in the interpretation. It was precisely because an analytical distance or alienation in relation to the respective cultural artefact was repeatedly achieved in the discussion that it became possible to subsequently carry out the reconstruction taking culture-specific aspects into account. Accordingly, such a procedure can not only contribute to understanding and knowledge about the respective research object, but also promote so-called "cultural learning" (Bakirci & Pilz, 2019; Brüch, 2001; Weber, 1997).

4.4　　Work step IV

The analysis in teams of two was followed by the fourth step. In this context, selected analytical patterns and elaborated hypotheses were discussed in the extended binational research group. In addition, further hypotheses were elaborated. Five to seven persons of different age, gender, etc. participated in the institutionalised interpretation group. At least half of the participants came from the cultural context of Mexico, while the remaining participants approached Mexican culture from the outside. Within the research group, narratives were reflected and further hypotheses, on possible social representations of non-academic work, were discussed and questioned. The underlying assumption was that recurring narratives, representations, etc. in cultural artefacts refer to socially shared knowledge and thus expose the central core of social representations.

Particularity:

The interpretation phases in the larger group proved to be useful and helpful in eliminating further blind spots in view of the situatedness. However, due to time constraints, it was not possible to look at every single analysis pattern in the larger interpretation group. Instead, those artefacts were selected for this setting that represented the topic in a condensed form or were particularly emblematic.

5　　Results

Forms of representation and narratives about non-academic work emerged from the cultural artefacts. In addition, the researchers also familiarised themselves with colloquialisms and their background. With the help of the artefact analysis, hypotheses could be generated regarding the core of prevailing social representations of non-academic work in Mexico. Some of the results of the artefact analysis are summarised below[7].

In the analysed cultural artefacts, a relatively unattractive image of non-academic work emerges. It often seems to be informal, which means a lack of job security, poor pay, etc. Strong gender differences can also be observed. Furthermore, the cultural artefacts show that non-academic work is usually physically demanding but cognitively undemanding. In terms of physicality, only office work is an exception. Social capital (Bourdieu, 1983) plays a prominent role for entry into a company, and promotion opportunities also depend strongly on this form of capital. In addition to limited promotion opportunities, company hierarchies also tend to be rigid. However, a narrative with more positive attributions regarding non-academic work can also be identified. This states that young people experience a positive transformation of their habitus through non-academic work and find their place in the world through it.

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[7]　　In the following, a comprehensive presentation of the results is omitted and instead reference is made to the article "Social Representation of Non-Academic Work in Mexico in the Light of Cul-tural Artefacts", which will be published by IJRVET.

Overall, however, non-academic work seems to lack prestige in Mexican society, which could explain the low acceptance of TVET programmes and thus negatively influence implementation attempts.

6   Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of cultural artefacts offers an interesting approach to a largely unknown field, especially in research projects with an international focus. Furthermore, the derived core hypotheses can be very helpful for further project steps. In KuPraMex, for example, the development of the survey instruments was based on the findings from the artefact analysis, which were compared with secondary data and scientific literature.

With regard to the diversity of cultural artefacts, the challenge arose to establish comparability between the different types of artefacts. This problem was addressed with the help of the elaborated analysis patterns and the group interpretation. However, the problem can also be circumvented by focusing on only one type of artefact.

In view of their omnipresence and reciprocity, the inclusion of cultural artefacts in scientific theory building seems to make sense. Especially in combination with other qualitative and/or quantitative approaches, there is the possibility of opening up a more holistic perspective on an object of study. However, triangulation also proves expedient because cultural artefacts in the research context are 'natural' data. Consequently, the production of such data is beyond the reach of the researchers, which is why in an explorative approach there is ex ante uncertainty about the extent to which relevant objects for answering the research question will be found. Given this uncertainty, it may also be advisable to conduct a preliminary survey instead of pursuing an exploratory approach.

In the context of reconstructing their symbolic meaning, cultural artefacts experience an influence by the researchers. Given the situatedness of each individual, it is therefore essential to institutionalise interpretation groups. In the context of international VET research, it is also necessary to conduct research together with researchers from the respective cultural context, as this is the only way to obtain adequate interpretations. Furthermore, artefact analysis in binational teams can initiate 'cultural learning' (Bakirci & Pilz, 2019; Brüch, 2001; Jammal, 2003; Weber, 1997) among researchers, even if they are unable to enter the respective country due to external circumstances, such as a pandemic.

The relevance of cultural learning has been highlighted in international studies, especially in relation to expatriates (Bakirci & Pilz, 2019; Jammal, 2003), while researchers have received less attention in this regard. For the field of international VET research, however, it may be relevant to train researchers' perception, thinking and acting in relation to the respective cultural context in order to ensure adequate action practices in the field and thus achieve desired results. Accordingly, cultural learning through artefact analysis in binational teams could favour the success and sustainability of international projects.

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