

358 Getting the record straight: On the production of records in the context of professorial recruitment

Anna Gerchen

German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW), Hannover, Germany

Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract

Focussing both on methodological reflection as well as empirical evidence, my paper peruses a critical approach to records and challenges an understanding of records as mere reports of 'what happened'. Drawing on empirical evidence regarding the documentation of personnel selection regarding professorships my research focuses on how these highly relevant decision processes are documented and what function this documentation serves. Specifically, I pursue the premise of not merely considering records and files as texts, but of understanding them theoretically and epistemologically as artefacts. My research thus shifts the focus away from the perception of records as providers of sheer factual information – an understanding not exclusive to the common-sense world, but also relevant in various research fields, including Higher Education research –, and towards the context of their production.

Full paper

Generally, records are understood to be reports of what happened, documented for the world (or rather: those authorised) to see. This understanding applies on the one hand to the 'common-sense world' (Gurwitsch 1962), and on the other to research: Document analysis is used by qualitative and quantitative researchers from various fields, including Higher Education research. Oftentimes, this method is perceived to meet higher standards regarding objectivity than competing methods. As the documents' existence is generally independent of the research process (they are neither produced by researchers themselves nor specifically for the purpose of being source material for research), they are classified as 'unobtrusive measures' (Webb et al. 1966).

My research challenges this uncritical approach to files as data sources (see also Ketelaar 2002; Skarpelis 2020) and shifts the focus away from the perception of files as providers of sheer factual information towards the context of their production. Specifically, I pursue the premise of not merely considering files as texts, but of understanding them theoretically and epistemologically as artefacts. The concept of artefact underlying this approach is based on Lueger, who defines artefacts as materialised products of human action (Lueger 2000, p. 141). Based on this theoretical approach to files my research focuses on the question of their production and their function.

Empirically, I draw on material collected on the subject of quality assurance regarding professorial recruitment at German universities. These appointment procedures are matters of high strategic value with very high stakes as the recruitment of professors is understood to be 'one of the most important decisions' (Kleimann and Hückstädt 2021, p. 171) in German public Higher Education. Due to the German chair system professors have a high degree of autonomy and as full professors in Germany generally are civil servants and hold their position for a lifetime, the appointment of a professor shapes the university for decades to come (Dobbins and Knill 2017; Hamann 2019). In view of this importance and the related demand for legal certainty, these procedures are highly formalised (see also Klawitter 2015; Kleimann and Hückstädt 2021) and well documented. This process of documentation is crucial as it argues the decision made by the appointment committee which is responsible for evaluating and ranking the candidates for the vacant professorship. This is also known to those who produce the records. Accordingly, there are social practices that influence the production of the records and thus shape them. The uncovering of these practices is the empirical objective of my study.

My data is drawn from a corpus of qualitative expert interviews (N=29) with those responsible for the proper running of appointment procedures for professorships at German universities. Those are (a) appointment managers for

professorships – a new but increasingly common position in the university administration that holds responsibility for the procedural quality assurance of appointment procedures for professorships –, (b) chairs of appointment committees, (c) heads of universities as well as (d) professors in the role of officers for appointment procedures. The methodological framework includes a theoretically informed sampling strategy and a critical approach to the concept of expert interviews (Bogner et al. 2009, Liebold and Trinczek 2009, Meuser and Nagel 1991). The interviews were conducted as semi-structured and partly narrative. The analysis of the material focuses on two questions: Firstly, I am studying which function appointment procedure files serve. On this basis, secondly, I ask how they are produced, describing how they are crafted, and which social practices shape them.

Thus, my work touches on several aspects that are relevant both to researchers as well as to practitioners in Higher Education and beyond. For one, it argues for a differentiated look on records in general and further it allows for the critical reflection of (qualitative) research and methodology: Not only obtrusive but also unobtrusive measures are to be questioned with regard to their social embedding. Documents contain valuable information that lies beyond the actual text. Uncovering this, however, is challenging as those producing the records might fear the accusation of 'tampering with evidence' by getting the record straight.

References

- Bogner, Alexander; Littig, Beate; Menz, Wolfgang (Eds.) (2009): *Interviewing Experts*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dobbins, Michael; Knill, Christoph (2017): Higher education governance in France, Germany, and Italy: Change and variation in the impact of transnational soft governance. In *Policy and Society* 36 (1), pp. 67–88. DOI: 10.1080/14494035.2017.1278868 .
- Gurwitsch, Aron (1962): The common-sense world as social reality. A discourse on Alfred Schutz. In *Social research* 29 (1), pp. 50–72.
- Hamann, Julian (2019): The making of professors: Assessment and recognition in academic recruitment. In *Social Studies of Science* 49 (6), pp. 919–941. DOI: 10.1177/0306312719880017 .
- Ketelaar, Eric (2002): Archival Temples, Archival Prisons: Modes of Power and Protection. In *Archival Science* 2 (3-4), pp. 221–238. DOI: 10.1007/BF02435623 .
- Klawitter, Maren (2015): Effects of institutional changes on requirements for vacant professorships in Germany. In *Working Papers in Higher Education Studies* 1 (2), pp. 1–19.
- Kleimann, Bernd; Hückstädt, Malte (2021): Selection criteria in professorial recruiting as indicators of institutional similarity? A comparison of German universities and universities of applied sciences. In *Quality in Higher Education* 27 (2), pp. 168–183. DOI: 10.1080/13538322.2021.1889760 .
- Liebold, Renate; Trinczek, Rainer (2009): Experteninterview. In Stefan Kühl, Petra Strodtholz, Andreas Taffertshofer (Eds.): *Handbuch Methoden der Organisationsforschung. Quantitative und qualitative Methoden*. Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwiss. / GWV Fachverlag, pp. 32–56.
- Lueger, Manfred (2000): *Grundlagen qualitativer Feldforschung. Methodologie – Organisierung – Materialanalyse*. Wien: WUV-Universitätsverlag.
- Meuser, Michael; Nagel, Ulrike (1991): ExpertInneninterviews - vielfach erprobt, wenig bedacht. Ein Beitrag zur qualitativen Methodendiskussion. In Detlef Garz, Klaus Kraimer (Eds.): *Qualitativ-empirische Sozialforschung. Konzepte, Methoden, Analysen*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, pp. 441–471.
- Skarpelis, A. K. M. (2020): Life on File: Archival Epistemology and Theory. In *Qualitative Sociology* 43 (3), pp. 385–405.

Webb, Eugene J.; Campbell, Donald T.; Schwartz, Richard D.; Sechrest, Lee (1966): Unobtrusive Measures. Nonreactive Research in the Social Sciences. Chicago: Rand McNally.