Micro-politics: An Underestimated Field of Qualitative Research in Political Science

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Abstract

The majority of political decision-making processes take place in political organizations such as political parties, parliaments, or ministerial bureaucracies. This paper explores the basic assumptions of micro-politics as a concept developed in organization research and loosely discussed in political science. The objective is to develop a heuristic framework for micro-analyses of political organizations by referring to different theoretical approaches. Micro-political concepts assume that there are always 'scopes of action' within organizational structures. The structuring of interactions within these scopes of action takes place less through formal rules than through various kinds of mechanisms. Bringing together several theories which conceptualize these structure mechanisms enables a common focus. This focus refers to the assumption that collective knowledge in the sense of an organizational culture provides patterns of thought which reduce complexity for actors. Furthermore, behavioral practices arise out of this collective knowledge which stabilizes interactions within these scopes of action. Empirical analysis which examines collective patterns of thought and practices within political organizations should be viewed in reference to qualitative research designs. Three designs applicable to micro-political studies are briefly sketched out in this paper: qualitative interviewing, ethnographic research, and the documentary method. The objective of micro-political studies is neither the analysis of structural restraints nor individual intentions but the explication of observable practices with their inherent collective knowledge in a specific organizational context, making possible systematic descriptions, comparisons, and causal explanations of political decision-making processes.

Zusammenfassung

Die Mehrheit politischer Entscheidungsprozesse findet in politischen Organisationen wie politischen Parteien, Parlamenten oder Ministerialbürokratien statt. In diesem Beitrag wird das organisationstheoretisch geprägte, aber vereinzelt auch in der Politikwissenschaft diskutierte Konzept *Mikropolitik* in seinen Grundzügen dargestellt und anhand verschiedener theoretischer Ansätze als heuristischer Bezugsrahmen für politikwissenschaftliche Mikroanalysen in politischen Organisationen aufbereitet. Mikropolitische Konzep-

te gehen davon aus, dass Akteure immer Handlungsspielräume innerhalb von Organisationstrukturen haben, in denen nicht formale Regeln, sondern andere Strukturierungsmechanismen wirken. Die Zusammenführung verschiedener theoretischer Ansätze, die diese Strukturierungsmechanismen konzeptionalisieren, verdeutlicht einen gemeinsamen Fokus. Zum einen wird angenommen, dass es kollektives Wissen im Sinne einer Organisationskultur gibt, die Denkmuster für Akteure bereit stellt. Zum anderen resultieren aus diesem kollektiven Wissen stabile Handlungspraktiken, die Interaktionsprozesse innerhalb von Handlungsspielräumen stabilisieren. Die empirische Analyse von kollektiven Denkstrukturen und Handlungspraktiken in politischen Organisationen machen einen Rückgriff auf qualitative Forschungsdesigns nötig. Drei für mikropolitische Studien gut geeignete Designs werden im Rahmen dieses Artikels kurz skizziert: qualitative Interviewforschung, Ethnographie und die Dokumentarische Methode. Das Ziel mikropolitischer Analysen ist weder die Aufdeckung institutioneller Beschränkungen noch individueller Intentionen, sondern die Rekonstruktion von Praktiken und latentem Prozesswissen in einem spezifischen organisationalen Kontext. Dies ermöglicht eine systematische Beschreibung von politischen Entscheidungsprozessen, macht diese darüber hinaus vergleichbar und eröffnet die Möglichkeit für kausale Erklärungen.

1   Introduction[1]

Empirical studies in political science focus mainly on institutions, regimes, or the individual decisions of rational actors (Wilshusen 2009: 138). The objective of such studies is to provide simplified assumptions which can explain and predict political decisions on a meso or macro level. The problem, however, is that structure-centered approaches often ignore ambiguities, ambivalences, and contradictions which are inherent in every structure; moreover, the rational-choice perspective concentrates on decisions without any reference to the decision-context, such as structure or power relations. In order to study complex decision-making processes involving different actors and diverse contextual factors it is necessary to work with a micro-analytical perspective.

Micro-analyses of political decision-making processes are rare. One reason for this is the lack of a long-lasting research tradition

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[1] I am grateful to the special issue editors and the reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions.

and consequently accompanying concepts and definitions. Furthermore, the examination of decision-making processes presents challenges in questions of methodology, for the reason that the concrete procedure of micro-analysis requires time, access to participants, and skills in methods of qualitative research. Nevertheless, micro-analyses do have a great potential for political science research.

In this paper I highlight *micro-politics* as a concept developed in organization research. The vast majority of political decision-making processes take place in political organizations such as parliaments, political parties, or ministerial bureaucracies. In political science debates there is, indeed, no common understanding of micro-politics (Nullmeier et al. 2003). Therefore, there is a need for clarification of the basic ideas of micro-politics as a concept in organization research and its significant potential for micro-analyses. The objective of this paper is, however, to stress a common heuristic framework for micro-analyses in political science on the basis of micro-political concepts and to propose analytical instruments for empirical studies. Accordingly, the next part of the paper discusses the roots of micro-politics and different understandings of the concept (2). Through this process it is possible to highlight the commonalities in specific micro-political approaches, reducing these to two key terms: knowledge and practice (3). After that I carve out the methodological implications and the explorative character of micro-political studies (4). Indeed, qualitative methods are the only plausible way to examine knowledge and practice within organizations. At the end, sample applications are presented to highlight the different research areas which are suitable for micro-political studies in political science (5).

2 Micro-analysis and micro-politics

Political science and especially policy studies focus on political processes, among other things, in order to understand specific policies or institutional pathways of decision-making (Blum and Schubert 2011). The majority of empirical studies concentrate on

macro- as well as meso-phenomena. A micro-analytical perspective does not challenge this focus but tries to answer macro- and meso-questions using discoveries on the micro-level. The prefix "micro" implies a focus on the smallest unit of action between specific actors. Hence, the objects of research are primarily actors and their behavior, but not from a psychological perspective which tries to explain behavior with individual skills or personality traits. Micro-analyses instead examine daily routines, self-evident behavior patterns, and informal processes (Schöne 2010: 15). As Patzelt emphasizes, micro-analysis explores the construction, reproduction, modification, and transformation of political policies, processes and structures in concrete situations (Patzelt 2000). Micro-analyses facilitate understanding the inner workings of politics and the decision-making process which leads to specific policies (Nullmeier et al. 2003).

In relation to this perspective arises the idea of micro-politics as a specific research concept[2]. The research interest is on organizations which are confronted with different actors and their interests, strategies, and power struggles. The underlying definition of organization is based upon March and Simon (1958, 1976). They see organizations as systems of coordinated acts between individuals and groups which have different preferences, information, interests, and knowledge. Organizations from this perspective transform conflict into cooperation. This perspective stresses the role of actors and analyzes structure through the interactions within an organization (Miebach 2007: 11f). Micro-political concepts share the basic premise of this actor- and process-centered perspective. Organizing is an interactive social process in which actors shape organizations. Hence, organizations are "socially constructed artifacts" (Letiche 2007: 188).

For the discussion of micro-political studies in political science, it is necessary to direct the focus onto political organizations. Political, in this case, means the alignment to generally binding decisions. In fact, the vast majority of political decisions are made in political organizations such as parties, parliaments, or ministerial bureaucracies. As a consequence, it is impossible

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[2] For some sample applications see part 5.

to understand politics without examining the organizational context in which decisions are made (Bogumil and Schmid 2001: 21f; Miebach 2007: 11). With this in mind, it is remarkable that political science has neglected the concrete focus on organizations for so long. As early as 1950 Merriam had written that it is confusing to draw a "sharp and exclusive line between political and other forms of organizations" (Merriam 1950: 9). With micro-politics as a heuristic framework it is possible to highlight the similarities in the way of thinking about micro-processes and the fruitful transfer of analytical instruments.

Because micro-politics did not evolve out of a systematic research tradition, the development of a common understanding has so far been difficult (Nullmeier et al. 2003: 14). The origins of micro-politics can be found in economic organization theory. The term *micro-politics* was first mentioned by Burns in his 1961 article on "Mechanism of Institutional Change," which emphasizes the role of actors and their interactions. For Burns the main feature of micro-politics is the use of individual power resources to create and change formal structure. Other early papers, such as those by Mechanic (1962) and Strauss (1963), also deal with individual political behaviour. In German-language research Bosetzky (1972; 1992) observed in his own working environment that formal hierarchy cannot completely determine actions. He follows Burns in using the term *micro-politics* for individual actions which undermine formal rules. In contrast to other authors, especially in economics, Bosetzky stresses that micro-politics can be seen as an elementary process which assures adjustment to the environment, the achievement of aims, and the integration of actors (Bosetzky 1992: 37).

These early articles "have not been followed with much vigor" (Farrell and Petersen 1982). Nevertheless, research has continued. At the top of the list are papers in economics which focus on the steering problems of companies as well as on their formal structures (see Kieser and Walgenbach 2010). Several studies in educational research have used micro-politics as a theoretical framework for empirical research into processes within schools (see Salo 2008). Furthermore, in industrial and organizational psychology micro-politics is regarded as a specific aspect of act-

ing (see Neuberger 1995; 2006). In organizational sociology Crozier and Friedberg developed their approach of strategic actors (see Crozier and Friedberg 1979, 1993, 1995). In political science there have been a few studies which are described in part five.

While these existing works show extreme heterogeneity in application, it is nevertheless possible to subsume them under the umbrella of micro-politics. The common premise of micro-politics is that formal rules, such as hierarchies and organizational aims, cannot determine actors' behaviors completely. As a consequence, there are always 'scopes of action' of one type or another. Various reasons for such 'scopes of action' have been stressed in the literature. Here are the five most important ones:

1. Organizations have more than one aim. As a consequence of this plurality, the potential for conflict and ambiguity arises. Therefore, conflicting aims make it impossible to determine actions within an organization (Reiners 2008).

2. The common aims and rules within an organization are never shared one to one. Hence, there is a distorted view of these goals (Crozier and Friedberg 1993: 57).

3. Rules are formulated generally and, hence, there is no direct relation to concrete situations. As a consequence, rules need interpretations which lead to scopes of action (Rüb 2009).

4. Structures are neither neutral nor unchallenged (Crozier and Friedberg 1993: 65f). They are not neutral because some actors are more privileged than others. They are not unchallenged because actors always try to widen their scope of action and change the balance of power to their advantage.

5. Scopes of action are often consciously implemented. Because controls and regulations mean an increase of costs, it is consequently not rewarding to regulate strictly in any situation. Furthermore, there is a consensus by the *human relations approach* that scopes of action which allow informal coordination are more efficient (Reiners 2008).

However, within these scopes of action organizations are confronted with deviating behavior. All authors of the micro-

political perspective agree that processes in organizations are anything but stable and consensual. As Ortmann stresses: "Life is lively" in organizations (Ortmann 1992: 17; translated by Dörrenbächer and Geppert 2009: 378). But there are differences as well which lead to two main strands of micro-politics: the aspectual and the conceptual perspective (for classification see Brüggemeier and Felsch 1992).

The core of the aspectual perspective is the definition of micro-politics as a concrete *aspect* of behavior. The theoretical basis is individualistic behavior theory, which focuses on the micro-political actor's interests, goals, and approaches (Alt 2001: 296f). "The ability of an actor to handle these micro-techniques is associated with a special personality type – *the micro-politician* – who regulates his policy in a Machiavellian manner to realize personal advantages against any resistance" (Hansen and Küpper 2009: 5). As a consequence, micro-politics undermines formal rules with destructive interactions (Reiners 2008: 11). Blickle and Solga emphasize the hidden and secretive character of micro-political actions (2006: 638). Neuberger also talks about actions which can only be located 'backstage' (1995: 14). However, micro-political attitudes, strategies, and tactics are the framework for the aspectual perspective. This includes understanding micro-politics as processes of social influence which can be functional or dysfunctional (Ferris et al. 1989), as unethical or illegitimate phenomena (Pfeffer 1983, 1984), or as the realization of individual interests (Porter et al. 2003).

The aspectual perspective is the most frequently encountered variation of micro-politics. The founding fathers Burns and Bosetzky define micro-politics in an aspectual way, as do Pettigrew (2001), Porter (2003), Schein (1977), Falbo (1977), Gandz and Murray (1980), Mintzberg (1984, 1985), Farrell and Peterson (1982), Vrendenburgh and Maurer (1984), Ferris et al. (1989), Neuberger (1995, 2006), Kipnis et al. (1980), and recently Dörrenbächer and Geppert (2009).

In the conceptual perspective, micro-politics is seen as a theoretical *concept* of organization which analyzes actors' behavior within an organizational context (Küpper and Felsch 2000: 149). Its theoretical core is located around scopes of action, power rela-

tions, and the context of decision-making in contrast to individual actions and their destructive consequences within the aspectual perspective. The aspectual perspective asks how individual actors fill out the scopes of action, and the imputation is: in a purely self-centered and often destructive way. In contrast, the conceptual perspective asks for the contextual influence on actions as well as stabilizing regulatory mechanisms within organizational scopes of action (Alt 2001: 294).

This idea is closely related to Giddens' theory of structuration (1984). Giddens conceptualizes process as a recursive loop where "structure determines actors" and "actors determine structure" (1984). He does not interpret structure as compulsion or repression, but as conditions for free action. This is the duality: action produces structure and structure produces action. Letiche stresses in relation to Giddens: "Organizational behavior is at once based on routines, patterns and decisions that have already taken place, and it is a constant process of establishing and strengthening shared habits, actions and choices. Organizations create patterns and order, and are created via patterning and ordering" (2007: 191).

However, in this conceptual perspective micro-politics is seen as an everyday phenomenon (Crozier and Friedberg 1993: 26). Power is not regarded as a characteristic of property or of authority; it is a characteristic of social relations, as a mutual exertion of influence through which scopes of actions can be expanded or protected (Hansen and Küpper 2009: 6). "Power is a positive phenomenon in the sense that the only meaningful way for us to exist is within all sorts of power structures" (Mantere 2003: 42).

To conclude, for the purposes of political science, micro-politics as a concept proves more insightful because the specific context of action is reflected theoretically and empirically. In the analysis of political processes, in particular, individual behavior or motivation is less important than the context in which the processes take place. 'Making politics' is a complex process, not a one man show.

3   Knowledge and practice

The key question from the micro-political perspective is how one can explain stable processes within organizational scopes of action. In order to carry out empirical studies there is a need for an analytical instrument which conceptualizes the structure within scopes of actions. There are some noteworthy ideas about how to conceptualize micro-political processes within organizations.

Well known and widespread is the concept of *informal institutions* developed by North (1990), which stresses the functionality of informal rules, but consequently focuses more on structure than on processes. Also well known in economical studies is the concept of *tacit knowledge* which emphasizes personal skills based on personal experience. Insch et al. (2008) stress the important function of tacit knowledge within organizational processes, but without making any connection to social interaction or organizational structure. Another way of thinking about processes in organizations is the idea of self-organized processes (see Bea and Göbel 2006; Klijn 2008). The *self-organization approach* originates in the natural sciences, but many economic studies refer to this concept to explain order in dynamic and complex systems. The assumption is that a stable degree of order is self-organized as a result of "unpredictable interactions within a system" (Marion 1999).[3]

In social science the *strategic organizational analysis* of Crozier and Friedberg (1993, 1995) investigate power relations and interactions by reconstructing strategies and games in organizations. The rules of the game are based on norms and organizational rules of procedure, but also on habits, understandings, and personal experiences. In relation to that approach, Hansen and Küpper (2009) examine the concept of *social identities*, which they attempt to connect with the game concept of Crozier and Friedberg. The authors state that actors have to interpret the power and actions of others. This interpretation takes place in a specific interpretation framework in which more or less stable expectations about actions and other actors exist. The actors do not

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[3] For an insightful discussion of the combination of self-organizing theory and the theory of structuration, see Fuchs 2002.

have to be familiar with other actors in order to know what to expect. "The existence of social identities as social constructs by actors opens finally even for (scientific) observers the possibility of identifying typical action and interaction situations with typical power relations, so that generalized statements beyond the concrete case about action and power processes and their consequences can be inferred" (Küpper and Felsch 2000: 150, translated by author[4]).

Based on the theoretical foundation of Garfinkel (1967) the concept of *ethnomethodology* views collective knowledge as orientation patterns for the daily behavior of actors. Patzelt (2000; 1987) defines it as the science of day-to-day methods of action, presentation, and interpretation with which members of specific social groups construct a common reality and patterns of action. These ideas focus more on an *organizational culture* than on individual strategies and power. Schöne defines culture as the framework of alternatives for action which are accepted in a social group and which limit the possibilities to perceive, to think, and to act (Schöne 2010: 29). This process-focus on culture means a focus on daily actions which manifest such cultural orientations (Mensching 2008). Orientations are nothing but the collective knowledge about the process and behavior within a specific organization. In relation to that idea, Weick defines organizing as the mutual consent about interpretations which reduce complexity and induce specific behavior patterns (1995).

All the ideas just presented make the development of a common heuristic framework for micro-political studies in political science possible. There is an implicit or explicit understanding of what determines actors' behavior within organizations and how it is possible to systematize and therefore analyze political decision-making processes. The convergence of the concepts can be

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[4] Original quotation: "Die Existenz sozialer Identitäten als soziale Konstruktion von Akteuren eröffnet schließlich auch für (wissenschaftliche) Beobachter die Möglichkeit, typische Handlungs- und Interaktionssituationen mit typischen Machtbeziehungen zu identifizieren, so dass sich über den je konkreten Einzelfall hinaus generalisierte Aussagen über Handlungs- und Machtprozesse und ihre Folgen ableiten lassen" (Küpper und Felsch 2000: 150).

seen in the assumption that there is an organization-related *collective knowledge* as the proper interpretation of situations and reactions in process-settings as well as several kinds of *practices* seen as routines or action patterns which offer an orientation in the daily interaction-processes.

This framework is based on practice theory in the sense of Bourdieu (1976), Giddens (1984) and Reckwitz (2003, 2004).[5] Practices are relatively stable behavioral routines which are based upon collective knowledge. Actions are not seen as punctual and intersubjective, but as socially-shared, by means of an implicit and interpretative knowledge, routine activities (Reckwitz 2003: 289). Collective knowledge means that actors have the same constituting and confirming cognitive idea of order (Rüb 2008: 8). "This knowledge, which they have picked up through formal training and informal socialization, tells them how to interpret the situation and where to go" (Wagenaar 2004: 649). The collective knowledge is closely connected with observable practices. For that reason, collective knowledge beyond specific practices is important, unlike the knowledge of a single actor. As a consequence, the single actor is replaceable, for the reason that practices do not change automatically when actors are changed.

The concept of micro-politics in connection with practice theory defines practices with the underlying knowledge as the structural stabilizing factor. This means that practices constitute the structure and the structure constitutes practices. This is, indeed, the same logic based on the duality of structure by Giddens as stressed for the whole conceptual perspective on micro-politics.

Authors like Brunner (2006) characterize this development as a new "paradigm for practice" in political science. This implies a need to overcome narrow, compartmentalized views of complex problems in favor of practical knowledge (Wilshusen 2009: 139). With the shift to practice theory it is possible to operationalize interactions within scopes of actions by practices. Instead of searching for individual strategies in decision-making processes the analysis of practice focuses on the search for "structures

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[5] For a brief summary see Hillebrandt (2009).

within action" (Wilz 2010: 115, translated by author[6]). Furthermore, it is possible to explain the legitimacy of practices via collective knowledge which is seen as a specific organizational culture. As already mentioned, culture is the process of constituting collective knowledge in political organizations (see part 3).

As a further far-reaching conceptual consequence, the separation of observed behavior into formal and informal is empirically impossible. There is an underlying assumption of unity, density, and inner consistency of formal structure which in reality cannot be found (Küpper and Felsch 2000: 194). From the micropolitical perspective the combination of formal and informal rules stabilizes contradictory intentions and actions within an organization and thus the very existence of the organization. Practices, as an analytical category, merge formal and informal rules and offer a systematic way to study decision-making processes within political organizations. In conclusion, a process can be neither formal nor informal, only micro-political.

4   Micro-politics and qualitative research

The main objective of micro-political studies is to systematize political decision-making processes according to observable practices and collective knowledge as an organizational culture. The second objective interprets the observed combination of practices in relation to the specific action context. This requires research designs which make the reconstruction of practices with different degrees of complexity and latent collective knowledge possible. Indeed, it is not easy to develop a systematic operationalisation without a clear picture of the concrete practices and the related knowledge in the particular political organization under study.

Nevertheless, many micro-political studies have quantitatively examined individual tactics within organizations (see for an overview Neuberger 2006 and Alt 2001). Quantitative studies like the *Profiles of Organizational Influence Studies (POIS)* (Kipnis et al. 1980; 1985; 1988) or the *Influence Behavior Ques-*

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[6] Original quotation: „Strukturen im Handeln" (Wilz 2010: 115).

tionnaire (IBQ) (Yukl et al. 2008) focus on individual behavior in the tradition of an aspectual understanding of micro-politics (see part 2). The difference appears in the neglect of the context, meaning that neither collective knowledge nor practices are analyzed. However, even if there are some good developments, quantitative designs are limited in examining the cultural context in which actors interact.

In empirical studies practices are reconstructed by observed or captured interactions. Thus far, micro-politics has not fully developed an analytical toolkit for empirical studies. The lack of concrete analytical instruments is evident in the existing studies. It often remains unclear why some interactions are relevant and others not, what kind of action pattern can be observed, and what the relevant context is. The focus on the undeveloped field of micro-politics with its inherent potential for deep analysis makes it absolutely crucial to restart this research area with a prolonged explorative phase. As a consequence, qualitative methods with which to explore practices and contexts in specific types of organizations are needed. "Where the strategic choice of the suitable practice is discussed and deliberated, the research receives access to the knowledge of the actors about applicable practices. When these strategic-reflective attitudes are missing, the practice repertoire has to be examined through ritual performance of processes" (Nullmeier et al. 2003: 19, translated by author[7]).

In contrast to the criterion of objectivity required in quantitative research, qualitative researchers need to be in close contact with those they study (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). But qualitative organization analysis hesitates to give reflected methodological answers in order to make use of qualitative research designs. It is noticeable that there is an arbitrary exposure to the label "qualitative" without an examination of several design strategies with their inherent implications (Mensching 2008: 70). For the estab-

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[7] Original quotation: „Dort, wo die strategische Wahl der geeigneten Praktik diskutiert wird und beraten wird, erhält die Forschung Zugang zum Wissen der Akteure über die anwendbaren Praktiken, wo diese strategisch-reflexive Einstellung fehlt, muss das Praktikenrepertoire aus den sich fast ritualhaft vollziehenden Prozessen erschlossen werden" (Nullmeier et al. 2003: 19).

lishment of micro-politics as an empirical research concept in political science it is, however, absolutely necessary to clarify its methodological implications.

There are three methodological designs which provide applicable methods for micro-political studies. First of all, there is the widespread *qualitative interview research* which offers several techniques and specific advantages in analyzing practices and collective knowledge. As a second design *ethnographic research* provides methods which make it possible to be part of the daily process within organizations. A third applicable design is the *documentary method* focusing on group discussions which disclose dissent and consensus and therefore collective knowledge. For an overview I will just touch upon the core ideas and related methods of these three methodological approaches.

Qualitative interviewing is probably the most established design in qualitative research. It is an effective way to gain insight into the perspective of others. "You are looking for explanations, examples, narratives, and stories about topics on which the interviewee is expected to be knowledgeable. You are seeking not just information, but understanding" (Luton 2010: 22). Characteristically in an interview the interviewee actively reconstructs events, experiences, behavior, and knowledge (Honer 2011). Hence, the sampling is an important preliminary decision in order to interview people with supposed knowledge in relation to the research question.

In contrast to the common impression, doing interview research is demanding and requires a professional exposure to the research process. The most difficult challenge for researchers is to stay open minded and to admit irritations in the own worldview (Kruse 2010). The interview can be conducted in several ways. The range is from structured to unstructured in the sense of standardized to pure narrative interviewing. The degree of structuredness depends on the prior knowledge and the research interest.[8]

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[8] For process of qualitative interviewing see Kruse 2010; Gläser and Laudel 2009; Steinar 2001

In micro-political studies the interview must be focused on processes and daily routines, the subjective assessment of institutions, their functions, and their effect as well as the identification of important actors and estimations about developments, challenges and changes within a specific political organization. Unlike quantitative questionnaires, qualitative interviewing has to be as undirected as possible in order to let the interviewees develop and formulate their own relevance system (Honer 2011). The focus, however, is on individual opinions and estimations.

In conclusion, at least eight reasons can be given for using qualitative interview designs in micro-political studies[9]:

1. To gain an insider's perspective
2. To better understand other points of view within one political organization
3. To understand the meaning that others attach to situations, settings, and events which take place within the organization under study
4. To understand their interpretations of those situations, settings and events
5. To develop holistic descriptions of the formal structure
6. To develop detailed descriptions of working life and the impact of formal rules
7. To describe specific decision-making processes
8. To allow reflection on the part of the interviewees about the collective knowledge and the practices employed

Ethnographic designs, like qualitative interviewing, provide an insight into political organizations. The difference is the direct involvement of the researcher. Ethnographic research is closely connected to the method of participant observation. The main objective is to understand an ethnic group through their cultural behavior, symbols, and knowledge (Fetterman 1998). Ethnographical studies arose to examine foreign cultures beyond the frontiers of the western world. However, ethnographic designs have also been used in relation to subcultures in the western soci-

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[9] The reasons are formulated on the basis of more general reasons in Weiss (1994: 9-11).

eties. "Such research tries to take on the participants' perspectives, the researchers joining them in their everyday or institutional lives for a while in order to analyze and describe how this everyday life evolves and how changes are produced and managed in it" (Flick 1999: 626). The cultural perspective of the practice approach in particular leads to the ethnographic way of doing research. Nullmeier et al. emphasize that through participant observation it is possible to collect data which are otherwise not accessible. Furthermore the increasing familiarity with the field enables the researcher to interpret processes and the underlying knowledge in a better way. Conclusions are based not on the participants' interpretations but rather on the researcher's observation of practices (2003: 35f).

Like qualitative interviewing, the participant observation can be structured or unstructured. The most structured way to observe is with fixed notice-schemes and categories which have to be filled out during the fieldwork. Micro-political studies need an open-minded observation with some degree of orientation but with sufficient space for new input and, as a consequence, the acceptance of irritations in relation to previous expectations. Interpretations are dependent on the ethnographic observer, but they are definitely not a subjective story-telling. When a researcher is experienced in dealing with ethnographic research, long-lasting observations offer a sophisticated data source for analyzing collective knowledge and practices.

However, Luton stresses that ethnographic researchers need to be well suited to ethnographic research and require the ability to deal with people sensitively, in addition to being empathetic and trustful. Moreover, the researcher needs an opportunity to gain access to a political organization (2010: 99). What may be easy in political parties may be challenging in ministerial bureaucracies, for example. However, it is worthwhile to invest the requisite time and effort because ethnographic research with participant observation and informal chats offers an excellent opportunity to 'learn the ropes' of the political organization under study.

In conclusion, there are at least seven reasons for using a qualitative ethnographic design in micro-political studies[10]:

1. To study specific practices through fieldwork in its natural setting
2. To use the concept of culture as a framework for describing practices within an organization
3. To seek the perspectives of people in process-settings
4. To attend to what members of an organization do and not just what they say
5. To adjust findings from interviews with observations of the real process
6. To explore the transfer of collective knowledge to practices
7. To remain independent of the involved actors' interpretations

The *documentary method of interpretation*, or simply *documentary method*, was first put forward by Karl Mannheim (1964) and then further developed by Harold Garfinkel with his concept of ethnomethodology, which I have already mentioned in part 3. Garfinkel states that the documentary method of interpretation searches for "documents" which in turn serve to constitute the underlying patterns of orientation (Garfinkel 1967:78). In German-language social science Bohnsack further developed this idea with a methodological focus on group discussions (2008, 2010). Following Bohnsack, the group discussion is a process of communication in which orientation patterns are documented. These documents represent collective experiences within group specific milieus which appear as collective orientation patterns in the group discussion (Loos and Schäffer 2001). The challenge for the scientific observer is the explication of implicit or "atheoretical" knowledge (Bohnsack 2008). The researcher, and not the participants, interprets the orientation structure in what is called, following Mannheim, the documentary interpretation. As a consequence, group discussions are seen as the most adequate method to examine implicit knowledge.

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[10] The reasons are formulated on the basis of a table in Luton (2010: 91).

Unlike the sampling of focus groups, group discussions need to be executed with "real groups" (Loos and Schäffer 2001). Participants, who have never seen each other before, faced with the task of discussing some issue, can never articulate the collective knowledge of an ethnic group. Discussion within a real group, like a faction in a parliament or a section of a ministerial bureaucracy, allows the focus to be directed onto specific milieu-related patterns. The difference between participant observation and group discussion is the artificial initiation of a discussion in order to effect the explication of implicit collective knowledge (Lamnek 2010).

The use of group discussions in political science is rare. In other disciplines it is much more common (Bohnsack 2010). Nevertheless, there are at least seven reasons for using the documentary method in micro-political studies:

1. To integrate multiple perspectives of members of an organization
2. To explicate implicit collective knowledge
3. To focus the discourse process about implicit collective knowledge
4. To examine the construction of collective knowledge as a culture
5. To put analyzed practices up for discussion
6. To reconstruct daily communication settings with controlled stimuli
7. To focus on group thinking and not on individuals and their positions

The separate presentation should not suggest completely different theoretical underpinnings. All qualitative research designs are closely related to the examination of practices and collective knowledge. "Qualitative research approaches provide a valuable way of recognizing, understanding, and sharing such tacit forms of knowledge" (Luton 2010: 12). Ideally, all presented methods are used. But limited time and financial resources force the researcher to focus on one design. However, more important than the quantity of data is the quality, which demands a sophisticated data collection process.

"Qualitative research approaches involve careful planning, respectful engagement, conscientious analysis, and deliberate presentation" (Luton 2010: 3). All designs require the greatest possible transparency by detailed reporting of the research process. It is not very productive to discuss the criteria of reliability, validity, and generalization in the same way as in quantitative research. Nevertheless there has to be a clear traceability of the process in order to have a chance to criticize the process of analysis and therefore validate the findings or otherwise. Furthermore, it is possible to follow up with an empirical study in another organization.

Some words have to be added to the discussion about generalization of findings because there is some misunderstanding in debates about methodology. With in-depth analysis of one single case it is possible to illuminate the everyday processes and relevant context in specific political organizations. This focus sacrifices the aspect of general relevance (Boos and Fisch 1987: 350). Statistical inference is not the objective of micro-political studies in the sense of this paper. However, qualitative research offers the opportunity to highlight ideographic and interpretative causal explanations. Geertz (1973), as do Collier, Brady and Seawright (2004), presents the concept of "thick description" as a way to address causation in qualitative research. The basic idea is to involve the reader in as many details about the case as possible and enable them to interpret those details, to understand the context and specific behavior. The objective is not prediction; it is a causal explanation of processes within a specific political organization. "Qualitative researchers seek an emic, ideographic knowledge; based on an insider's perspective, they seek understanding of a contextualized, specific situation, which may or may not transfer to other situations" (Luton 2010: 9-10).

5   Examples of application

For a better understanding of micro-politics and its methodological implications I will discuss five examples of application.

The first study by Bogumil and Kißler (1998a, b) refers to the concept of Crozier and Friedberg in order to study opportunities for and limitations to reforms in public administration organizations. Reduction of hierarchy, redefinition of government's responsibility, and implementation of new structures and new procedures in administrative bodies provoke many conflicts within the reform process. The authors analyze power struggles and resistance to change, interpreting the reasons for success or failure on the base of qualitative interviews. The micro-political perspective enables us to understand that hierarchy is not only connected to a top-down process-function which limits the scope of action, but also to an expected career path. For that reason, the actors within local administration bodies reject the idea of reducing hierarchy in cases under study.

Biegelbauer and Grießler (2009) examine practices in Austrian ministerial bureaucracies with reference to practice theory. Their objective is to examine practices which structure the production of law within the administrative bodies. They carried out various qualitative interviews and examined four case examples. They present in their paper five "bunches" of practices: *To get a work order*, *to regulate access to the process of law production*, *to operate with time management*, *to fix contents*, and finally *to write a law*. Not every practice gets a clear definition frame, but the idea is remarkable. With the micro-political focus on practices it is possible to systematize and compare processes within ministerial bureaucracies. This study is a good foundation for further developments in micro-political analysis of ministerial bureaucracies, even though the authors have published only one short paper presenting their findings.

Nullmeier, Pritzlaff and Wiesner (2003) develop micro-politics as an ethnographic concept in order to study political decision-making processes in universities. Practices are conceptualized as corporeal performance. The analysis of several interactions in meetings made use of participant observation. The researchers filmed various committee meetings to examine gestures and mimics which determine the decision-making processes in a very detailed way. On the basis of these data they analyze the collective knowledge with regard to how to act and react in specific

situations. The key questions are: What do people in committees within universities know, how do they act, and how do they position themselves? The findings in this pioneering work on systematizing actions within committees put micro-politics and ethnographic designs on the agenda of political science.

Rüb (2009) introduced his concept of political practices as an analytical tool for examining political leadership-styles within government organizations. He stresses seven basic practices which cover the government process: *acclamation*, *agreement*, *confrontation*, *instruction*, *negotiation*, *gratification*, and *working with threat*. The specific combination of these practices in a political decision-making process is defined as the "style" of a political leader. The innovative idea is the connection of a systematization of political decision-making processes with the political leadership style through the concept of practice. Therefore it is possible to compare the practice combinations of different political leaders. A further development by Willner (2009) expands the analytical view and includes context factors such as political coalition, situation, and institutional framework to provide causal explanations of the style under study. He examines the style of Angela Merkel, the chancellor of Germany, in two decision-making processes and identifies the dominance of bargaining-practices. Willner used qualitative interviewing and content analysis to collect data.

Finally, Patzelt (2003, 2001, 1995) and Schöne (2010) examine parliamentary processes with theoretical reference to ethno-methodology and cultural approaches. They focus mainly on German parliaments as political organizations and therefore examine the daily working processes of their members. Recently Schöne examined the "parliament culture" of the German Bundestag and the Saxon Landtag. His further development of a heuristic framework for micro-analysis is extremely fruitful, clarifying basic assumptions as well as complex theoretical connections in the research area of micro-analysis. Notably, a reference to micro-politics with its focus on organizations is lacking. Nevertheless, he examines collective knowledge and practices in daily decision-making processes by participant observations of committees, factions, or party meetings in combination with qualita-

tive interviewing. The result of this impressive micro-political study is a remarkable view inside the daily processes of the parliament with the surprising conclusion that committees are not the place for issue-related debates. Schöne identifies the working-groups of the parliamentary factions as the real decision-making context. Parliaments, indeed, are important areas for micro-political studies in political science.

6   Conclusion

Micro-politics is neither a paradigm (Reiners 2008: 16), nor a method (Küpper and Felsch 2000: 190), nor a metaphor for the multiplicity of goals, interests, and conflicts within an organization (Salo 2008: 499). Nor is it just a special type of behavior (Neuberger 1995). Micro-politics is a theoretical concept which examines interactions within organizations. In this paper I refer to micro-politics as a framework for micro-analyses in political organizations. Micro-political research is an insightful way to analyze political decision-making processes systematically, by exploring collective knowledge and practices in relation to specific political organizations. The connection of micro-politics and practice theory reflects formal *and* informal structures, conscious *and* unconscious decisions, rational *and* non-rational actors, as well as inner organizational *and* environmental conditions of action. The focus is on observable practices and specific organizational contexts and not, as in many other concepts, on individual strategies or institutional restraints. The most important feature, however, is its acknowledgment of complexity and, at the same time, the possibility of making comparisons between processes in similar types of organization.

In this paper I plea for more micro-analyses and, as a consequence, for more qualitative research in political science. It is not possible to understand policies without the decision-making process within organizations. The combination of micro-politics as a theoretical framework and qualitative designs is underestimated in political science research. It is time to adopt organizations as relevant objects of research in order to enable new analytical per-

spectives in several research areas such as public administration research, political party research, leadership research, and parliamentary research.

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