

# Educational research in (post-)digital spaces

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**Abstract:** Based on approaches of digital ethnography and using the work of Sofia da Silva as an example, we pose reflections on future shifts and innovations in the context of qualitative educational and biographical research: What methodological questions arise when current educational science objects are viewed from a (post-)digital perspective? We assume, among other things, that due to the interweaving of analogue and digital worlds new forms of biographization emerge, which require a theory-generating exploration of hybrid modes of experience as well as of the embedded interrelation of, for example, ‘body’, ‘education’, and ‘biography’. This could be achieved, for example, by a stronger mediation of ethnographic and biographical research approaches, or through an investigation of the connection between digital everyday practices, digitally mediated prefigurations and biographizations.

**Keywords:** education, digital research, ethnography, biographical research

## Biografie- und Bildungsforschung im Zeichen (post)digitaler Welten

**Zusammenfassung:** Auf der Grundlage von Ansätzen der digitalen Ethnografie am Beispiel von Arbeiten von Sofia da Silva stellen wir Überlegungen zu zukünftigen Verschiebungen und Neuerungen im Kontext qualitativer Bildungs- und Biografieforschung an: Welche methodologischen und methodischen Fragen stellen sich, wenn (post-)digitale Perspektiven auf aktuelle erziehungswissenschaftliche Gegenstände eingenommen werden? Wir gehen u.a. davon aus, dass aufgrund des Ineinanderverwobenseins von analogen und digitalen Welten neue Formen der Biografisierung entstehen, die eine theoriegenerierende Erforschung hybrider Erfahrungsweisen und der darin angelegten Relationierung beispielsweise von ‚Leib/Körper‘, ‚Bildung‘ oder ‚Biografie‘ bedarf. Dies könnte beispielsweise über eine stärkere Vermittlung von ethnografischen und biografischen Forschungszugängen sowie durch Untersuchung des Zusammenhangs von digitalen Alltagspraktiken, digital vermittelten Präfigurationen und Biografisierungen fokussiert werden.

**Schlagwörter:** Bildung, Digitale Forschung, Ethnografie, Biografieforschung

## Introduction

This contribution examines how qualitative educational and biographical research changes when it approaches current objects of educational research from (post-)digital perspectives. Sofia da Silva’s work towards a digital ethnography<sup>1</sup> offers a point of connection that gene-

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1 This special issue is rooted in the symposium ‚Höher, schneller, weiter‘ – und doch nicht besser? Entwicklungen qualitativer Bildungsforschung in der Selbstkritik“ [“Higher, faster, farther’ – but not better? Developments in qualitative educational research in self-criticism”] that was prepared for the 27th

rates impulses for discussing new lines of research (section 1), for example, for educational research sensitised by biographical analysis, since changing forms of biographisation call for new understandings of educational processes (section 2). Both perspectives feed into the discussion about how current methodologies of qualitative research in educational science and biographical studies (section 3) need to change.

## 1 (Post-)digital ethnography: impulses

Based on the thesis of post-digital educational processes, which analyses the demarcation between analogue and virtual worlds, Sofia da Silva asks what this means for developing new ethnographies. Taking a critical perspective on societal dynamics, she notes that relations of inequality are (re)produced in the interweaving of analogue and digital, or virtual worlds. Shifted or dissolved borders “are still crossed by inequalities and power relation asymmetries“ (James/Busher 2013), when they became post-digital. So, how does this new reality influence how we conduct ethnography? She and her colleagues conclude in line with a methodological critique of the logic of optimisation that “not only is the Internet a Place, it is also a tool and a way of being, and each of the aspects poses different methodological choices” (Markham 1998, quoted in Parker-Webster/Silva 2013, P. 123). Consequently, da Silva’s theory of digitalisation establishes the internet not only as a site of ethnography, but also as a tool and a way of being, while fundamentally challenging the boundaries previously drawn between analogue and digital worlds. Clearly, this shift also impacts ethnographic research: Da Silva calls on ethnographers collecting data to move also fluidly between the analogue and digital worlds, to explore the interplay between these worlds. “[W]hat does it mean to ‘enter the field’ in an ethnography conducted in online contexts”? (Parker-Webster/Silva 2013, P. 125), she asks, emphasising, on the one hand, the importance of a critical perspective on virtually permeated lifeworlds that pays close attention to dynamics of power in society, while raising important questions about which methodological reflections and methodological approaches are adequate. What do the questions of a (post-)digital ethnography, that this new perspective raises, mean for qualitative educational research and biographical research in the context of digitalisation processes?

Ethnography has developed a productive epistemological principle: The notion of “going native” describes research processes employed by researchers doing fieldwork, allowing them to experience and explore things that are new and unfamiliar to them. The often quoted question “What the hell is going on here?” (Geertz 1987) can also be applied to expeditions into online worlds, as discussed by da Silva. The subjectivising relationality of the internet encompassing spaces, virtual worlds, and ways of being challenges scholars, working on qualitative educational and biographical research, to think outside the box and to dare try new methodologies.

Turning to social practices in digitalised worlds sparks a particular moment of alienation in the face of the emergence of entirely new settings of digital practices, as we have seen in the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic. However, it is important to be aware of a risk that accompanies the institutionalisation of research methods, namely, that they could become so established that they become calcified as a type of pillar of optimisation, and become canonised in a way that no longer allows critical discussion. Ethnography – in a

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DGfE Congress and to which Sofia Marques da Silva was invited as one of the main representatives of the approach.