

Qualitative Research in a Changing Epistemic Context. The Case of a Small Social Science Community

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Abstract: The fact that qualitative approaches are gaining more and more recognition in social sciences can be explained as a consequence of a change in epistemic and institutional parameters. In this sense we can speak about the "post-positivist" era in which more complex and inclusive research designs are needed. Analyzing the development and the state of the art of qualitative research in a small research community, two conclusions can be drawn. First, the attractiveness and utilization of this approach has been increasing in the last decade, while its institutional status (in terms of academic curricula) is still weak. It has been shown that the major step towards the post-positivist state has been taken by international research projects in which Slovenian social scientists have been involved.

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1. Social Research in the Era of Post-Positivist (Post-Normal) Science

In the last decade it became more and more apparent that a renaissance in qualitative research was on the horizon and that the increasing relevance and reputation of this approach was incontestable. The establishment of qualitative methods as an indispensable methodological tool should not only be understood as a shift in the epistemological approach of social sciences but also as a step toward interdisciplinary collaboration among different paradigms and fields. According to some authors we are witnessing a profound methodological turn:

"For more than two decades, a quiet methodological revolution has been taking place in the social sciences. The social sciences and humanities have drawn closer together in a mutual focus on an interpretative, qualitative approach to research and theory. Although these trends are not new, the extent to which the 'qualitative revolution' has overtaken the social sciences and related professional fields has been nothing short of amazing." (DENZIN & LINCOLN 1998, p.VII) [1]

In sociology and the other social sciences it would be difficult to find anyone who would openly oppose the scientific status of qualitative methods (see CORBETTA

2003), but the larger picture is more multilayered and complicated than suggested by DENZIN and LINCOLN. [2]

How can we explain the increasing significance of qualitative methodology and the shift in professional habitus? In our opinion, these phenomena should be (re)considered in the context of broader epistemic and institutional changes in scientific activity in post-industrial, knowledge-based societies (which are at the same time globalized risk societies). It can refer here to the transition from a "positivist" paradigm based on methodological exclusivism and disciplinary monism to a more inclusive and eclectic postpositivist (or post-normal) state of scientific research and theorizing. This paradigmatic turn has refocused attention onto the "context of application": on transdisciplinarity, on triangulation, and on soft variables such as cultural and social capital or civilizational competence (see SZTOMPKA 1999). [3]

There are different labels for this paradigmatic turn in addition to post-positivism, which we prefer to use; some authors speak about post-normal (FUNTOVICZ & RADETZ 1993) or post-academic science, and about Mode 2 production of knowledge. The latter is referred to in a book written by GIBBONS et al. (1994) who laid the groundwork for further discussions concerning new trends in scientific research and theory building. The authors introduced the distinction between so-called Mode 1 and Mode 2 production of knowledge, which, in some aspects, overlaps with our understanding of the distinction between positivism and post-positivism. [4]

Mode 1 is discipline based—the relation between basic and applied research is linear. In contrast, Mode 2 knowledge production is transdisciplinary and is characterized by circularity or "a constant flow back and forth between fundamental and applied, between the theoretical and practical" (GIBBONS et al. 1994, p.9). In other words: the problem-solving context of research does not simply imply the "application" of an already codified corpus of data and knowledge but requires a new reconfiguration of knowledge; application is also a very important inspiration for theory-building. As GIBBONS et al. suggest, one has to take into account that "Working in an application context creates pressures to draw upon a diverse array of knowledge resources and to configure them according to the problem at hand" (p.27). The main conclusion we can make may be formulated as follows: What matters is the quality and relevance of data, regardless if they are gathered by quantitative or qualitative research instruments (see FLICK 1998, on quality management). Alternatively, the best solution seems to be a strategic combination (triangulation) of various instruments, data sources and theoretical perspectives. This presupposes the increasing ability of self-reflexivity on the part of researchers, some kind of deliberative research design, where other interested actors (such as stakeholders, beneficiaries or clients) also co-operate in the process of "discursive reflexivity" (see also ALVESSON & SKOELDBERG 2000). To put it differently: the conventional positivistic assumption that scientific method based on quantifiable data can alone guarantee access to objectivity and truth—at least in the context of application or in situations where the problem-solving capacity of science is required—is

challenged by a much more complex research design which involves team work, the participation of "lay" actors (for instance, representatives of the local community) and practicing what Anthony GIDDENS (1984) calls double hermeneutics (the flow back and forth between theoretical and practical knowledge). [5]

Now we have arrived at the heart of our discussion. Who is better equipped to meet the criteria of data quality and better experienced in reflexive methodology? Who has more experience in the participative and co-operative nature of the research process than qualitative (field) researchers? If this is true, they need not be worried about their future status, and the efforts in the past decades to develop a sophisticated repertoire of qualitative methods will have fruitful results. What is needed is an adaptation to new institutional and epistemic circumstances and the formation of a more appropriate professional habitus. [6]

On the other hand, as Mode 2 knowledge production presupposes, qualitative research can take part in very important, large-scale, applied (problem-solving) research projects compared with those conducted by disciplines based on "hard data." I would like to draw attention to the reader *Qualitative Sociology as Everyday Life*, wherein one of the authors reports that one of the biggest injections of private funding into British sociology at the present time is for ethnomethodological studies on the organizational use of new information technology (DINGWALL 1999). The ethnomethodologist's eye for detail turned out to be very useful in identifying interactional and organizational blockades in the transfer of technology to high-tech industry, thus contributing at least indirectly to a reduction in production costs. [7]

The social sciences are not able to generate solutions in the form of "pure" prescriptions and "categorical imperatives"; their role and expertise potential are more modest. [8]

They can produce hypothetical solutions in the form of scenarios, multiple options, and cost-benefit or so-called SWOT (based on assessment of Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat) analyzes. They can be very helpful by indicating and evaluating the side-effects and potential risks of certain decisions and policies (here one could refer to the growing use of qualitative methods in the framework of evaluation research). [9]

The so-called hard, (still) positivist oriented disciplines and schools are hardly better prepared for these tasks than soft, qualitative ones. Moreover, thanks to their capacity for self-reflection, the latter is in some regards more capable of dealing with societal problems and risks. On the other hand, post-positivism is not anti-positivism: it does not imply the abolition of the rules of scientific method. It does not mean the relativization of criteria in the sense of the post-modernist principle "anything goes." On the contrary, it is a more demanding methodological approach since it requires a higher degree of reflexivity and a capacity for complex thinking. If we add to our debate about post-positivism some other dimensions characteristic of sociology and other related disciplines (to some

extent also of economics)—such as "cultural turn," the discovery of the significance that "soft" variables in the form of cultural and social capital, trust, value orientation, etc. can have for explaining the developmental or institutional performance of certain societies or regions (PUTNAM 1993; INGLEHART 1997), the reconsideration of the micro-macro link, and the already mentioned emerging consensus about the primacy and advantages of triangulation—we obtain a more vivid picture of this new trend. [10]

In such a changing frame of reference, the qualitative research orientation is entering a new phase. The point is no longer a competition in terms of a zero-sum game between qualitative and quantitative, positivist and interpretative approaches or, on the other hand, "splendid isolation." Instead, the emphasis is on reconciliation and cooperation in the form of hybrid research teams and on establishing communication between different types of "epistemic cultures" (KNORR-CETINA 1999) within the social sciences. [11]

There is no doubt that this renaissance in qualitative research has been put forward initially in some social science communities in Western Europe and North America and that the wave of revitalization of qualitative approaches is only just getting underway in Eastern (and Central) European research centers. But this does not mean starting from scratch, in this region one can also find a rather interesting tradition of utilization and the recent development of these approaches and methods (see KAASE, SPARSCHUH & WEINIGER 2002). [12]

In spite of the fact that in the last thirty years a number of successful research studies based on qualitative methods in Slovenian social sciences have been published, these methods still have marginal status. This marginality is above all caused by weak institutionalization and insufficient inclusion of qualitative approaches in (post)graduate curricula. On the other hand, the interest and preference for this type of research is much higher than in past decades. This means that also in the Slovenian case we can speak of a renaissance in qualitative research and of the "post-positivist" turn. However, many researchers who are inclined to utilize this approach in their basic or applied projects are rather "self-taught" and it takes some time for them to reach a certain level of experience and competence. [13]

2. The History of Qualitative Research in Slovenia

The beginnings of qualitative approaches were located on the margins of Slovenian sociology, not only within research endeavors themselves but also within institutions—research institutes. In the 1970s and even earlier the social sciences in socialist Slovenia were under more or less direct political control, and in such an atmosphere researching "in vivo" with techniques such as field research, case studies and open interviews were a matter of personal preference and responsibility. In spite of many obstacles, in the early 1970s, researchers at the Institute of Sociology and Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana¹ were the

¹ This institute was partly an asylum for academics and researchers who had lost their positions because of their politically or/and ideologically unsuitable convictions. Later the Institute for

first to use qualitative methods in sociological research. Matija GOLOB was one of the first sociologists who included the method of participant observation in investigations of social stratification (GOLOB 1972), for which quantitative methods were predominantly employed at that time. [14]

The first large, exclusively qualitative method research project *Preventive Volunteer Social Therapy Work with Children* was carried out by an interdisciplinary research group of sociologists, social psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers in conjunction with a group of student volunteers (STRITIH, KOS, ADAM & PODMENIK, 1977). This was the first, relatively comprehensive, twice repeated (summers of 1975 and 1976) action research which dealt with the introduction and evaluation of alternative therapies in work with behaviorally disturbed children and adolescents. In addition to already recognized qualitative methods such as participant observation and personal diaries, the researchers also employed methods and techniques which were utilized for research purposes as well as for therapeutic ones: unstructured interviews, simulation games, psychodramas and role-playing. The sociological portion of the project also included institutional analyses, particularly in relation to the problem of resistance to institutional innovation. [15]

In the 1980s the employment of qualitative methods had expanded to other Slovenian institutes. At the Institute of Criminology a number of projects with qualitative methodology were conducted, at the Slovenian Research Institute in Trieste in-depth interviews regarding the assimilation of the Slovenian minority in Italy had been employed in the fields of sociology and psychology (SUSIČ & SEDMAK 1983). A number of projects using instruments of qualitative methodology were launched at the Higher School for Social Work (now the Faculty for Social Work). [16]

At the end of the 1980s the use of qualitative methods was also extended to those areas which foreign sociologists had been studying by using qualitative methods for almost 20 years: marginal groups and youth subcultures. Researchers in interdisciplinary projects employed a combination of qualitative techniques in studies of adolescents and so-called new civil movements—feminist, peace, ecological—including case studies and semi-structured interviews (ULE 1989). [17]

In the 1990s the use of unstructured and semi-structured interviews in different disciplines and at different institutes expanded considerably. Frequently these techniques were combined with structured interviews or surveys. At that time other qualitative methods, known and studied from foreign research studies, were introduced. The subject matter and sociological sub-fields in which qualitative methods were implemented also remained varied throughout the 1990s. [18]

Along with an ever more systematic inclusion of semi-structured interviews among the methodological research techniques which were generally accepted,

Sociology and Philosophy was transformed into the Institute for Sociology and in 1990 it was joined to the Faculty of Social Sciences under the name the Institute for Social Sciences.

researchers began to focus more on qualitative modes of text analysis, partly as a way to complement interviews and partly as an independent research method employed primarily in the context of an interpretative sociological approach. [19]

The comprehensiveness of qualitative research techniques dictated the collaboration of different research institutions. One example of such was the research team composed of researchers and collaborators from the Center for Theoretical Sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences and researchers from the Institute for Ethnic Studies, which carried out a project on Slovenian micro and macro social reality as well as on Slovenia's position in an international framework, with a particular focus on the formation of multiple identities (ADAM 1996). [20]

Since the late 1990s the use of qualitative research techniques in combination with quantitative methods has been increasing not only in number and with regard to the different institutions, but also in that qualitative research has left the margins of the social science field. The results of the small investigation which we carried out among Slovenian researchers² illustrate, besides the expansion of qualitative research, that mixed (qualitative and quantitative) research has been increasing, that research content is broadening and that the circle of researchers who regularly use these methods is becoming wider, especially regarding younger colleagues. The most frequently used qualitative technique remains the semi-structured interview. Regarding such, the life history or life course interview is gaining in importance. It is worth mentioning that the focus group technique is becoming more important as well. [21]

A typical Mode 2 project was launched in 1998 by the Center for Theoretical Sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences on behalf of the Municipality of Koper. It was a field research project with policy-relevant goals. Besides the basic task—to collect data and the opinions of different target groups, the research results should contribute to the revitalization of villages in that part of Slovenian Istria. The intentions of the project were to empower and encourage the participation of the local population in the context of an emerging natural (regional) park, the formation of a so-called study circle, and the expression and implementation of local actors' interests, ideas and options concerning new economic and agricultural activities (such as ecological farming or "soft" tourism) in the framework of sustainable development in this region (ADAM et al. 2001). In another comprehensive investigation relating to urban phenomena (STANKOVIČ, TOMC & VELIKONJA 1999) researchers from the Department for Cultural Studies employed the methods of participant-observation, semi-structured interviews and the text analysis of primary and secondary sources to study youth subcultures (punks, bikers, gays and lesbians, metal-heads, rockabilies, ravers, skaters and skinheads). [22]

2 In order to gain an overview of the recently conveyed qualitative researches, we sent a short questionnaire to the researchers who had been doing this kind of research for a longer period of time and through the "snow ball" sample gathered data among younger researchers. The questionnaire reached approx. 25 Slovenian researchers by e-mail.

The shift of subjects in Slovenian qualitative research to more complex and interdisciplinary ones has been pushed forward by the inclusion of Slovenian research teams in international, especially EU, projects. One such case is the project entitled *Education and Training for Governance and Active Citizenship (ACS 2003)* in the 5th EU Program. Six research teams from EU countries and Slovenia worked together for over 3 years. As stated in the final report of the project, one of the reasons for using qualitative methods was to capture the different socio-cultural contexts across a range of European countries. For that reason the project was designed with a participatory orientation and grounded in a participatory method. The links between research team(s), policy makers, professionals, active citizens from chosen samples and other participants were established by means of advisory panels, workshops, international team meetings and focus groups. Semi-structured life history interviews were also carried out (ETGACE 2003). [23]

At the Faculty for Social Sciences the combination of qualitative and quantitative data analysis was utilized in comparative research on industrial restructuring in CEE countries (ROJEC & STANOJEVIČ 2001).³ Nevenka SADAR coordinates the Slovenian research team in the international project initiated at the beginning of 2003 as part of the 5th EU program. The project, entitled *Gender, parenthood and the changing European workplace: Young adults negotiating the work-family boundary*, is based on a complex combination of qualitative and quantitative research techniques: documents and demographic data analysis, survey research, interviews with managers and focus groups with young parents. One of the project goals is to define national contexts for understanding young partnerships and parenthood in eight countries and the influence of national politics on family-friendly programs organized in eight EU countries. [24]

The participation of Slovenian researchers in international projects is of great professional value for them; not only do they gain insight into the most up-to-date methodological trends, they learn communication, co-ordination and monitoring skills, as well. With regard to the traditional institutional framework which prevails in Slovenian academic and research organizations, the international projects are a great opportunity to gain more experience in team work and to learn about organizational modes, such as "project" or "ad-hoc" ways of conducting and governing research. [25]

3. A Discussion on Epistemic and Practical Perspectives of the Qualitative Approach

There are very few theoretical or epistemological works published in Slovenia concerning qualitative methods or the qualitative paradigm. Frane ADAM (1982) and Blaž MESEC (1998) have written the most on these topics. ADAM's main ideas are gathered in his doctoral dissertation, which he defended in 1981 at Zagreb University and published in a revised version in 1982. In *A Critical Guide to Sociological Research* he discusses epistemological and general methodo-

3 In 1999 STANOJEVIČ [1999] edited a book based on research on five enterprises by means of semistructured interviews.

logical issues of the qualitative approach as an alternative to quantitative sociological research. In his opinion this relation is not exclusive and he is clearly in favor of triangulation. Special attention is paid to the concept of action research (ADAM 1982). While he focuses on research method issues (for example, the role of the researcher and methods of collecting empirical data) and analyzes the organization of the research process in detail (especially from the point of view of the sequential approach), he pays less attention to issues concerning the processing and analysis of qualitative data (MESEC 1998). We should also note that he deals with these problems and provides useful solutions in a book written with Veljko RUS, an expert in industrial relations and organizational sociology (RUS & ADAM 1986). [26]

Blaž MESEC (1998) deals with the practical aspects of data collection and analysis in his textbook, which is the only work dedicated entirely to the issue of qualitative methodology. In this work he discusses all three aspects of social science research: epistemology, the organization of the research process and concrete models for gathering and processing data. MESEC is the Slovenian author who has written the most on qualitative methodology and action research in relation to social work (1988, 1993). [27]

Tanja RENER (1993, 1995, 1996) has written a series of articles concerning the use of the biographical method in women's studies. The biographies of women as well as women's life histories represent a "subjective" reconstruction of a historical and social period as well as of the position of women in society. For this reason the use of biography as method has a completely different role in women's studies than in social science research (RENER 1996). [28]

One must also mention here the significance of Tina KOGOVSĚK's master's thesis (conducted in the field of statistics and computer science) which also focuses exclusively on the issue of qualitative methodology. Her thesis deals with questions of measurement, validity and reliability while at the same time discussing the scientific status of the qualitative approach in the context of post-modernity and post-positivism (KOGOVSĚK 1998). [29]

4. Qualitative Methods in the Curriculum

The methodology courses for students in the social sciences at the three Slovenian universities—in Ljubljana, Maribor and Koper—are still quite "positivistically" focused: students primarily learn to use quantitative methods and statistical analyses in the research process.⁴ They are acquainted with qualitative methodology only in a superficial manner. The partial exception is a methodology class *Research methods in sociology and cultural studies* offered at the Faculty of Arts at the University in Ljubljana; in this class students are to some extent

4 The third university center in Koper has been emerging together with the new Faculty of Arts where the students of cultural studies and social anthropology already have (or will have in the next few years) the opportunity to be educated in the use of qualitative methods. Also the Faculty of Management, whose publishing house decided to translate an English methodological textbook focused on the qualitative approach, has shown interest in teaching their students the new methodological orientation.

acquainted with both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The same is true also for the methodology taught at the Faculty for Social Work. Yet the only subject that focuses exclusively on qualitative research methods is taught at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University in Ljubljana, but only in the Cultural Studies Department. In the class *Methods of Qualitative Analysis*, third-year cultural studies students learn about the qualitative paradigm from the epistemological aspect and about concrete modes of implementing qualitative methods for the collection and processing of data. Great emphasis is placed upon including students in the research process, as well as in seminars and interactive-group work. Students are required to write a *seminar report* based on fieldwork. The literature used in teaching the above-mentioned course is mostly international (this is true also for the course taught at the Faculty of Arts); however, at the same time students should also become acquainted with qualitative research conducted by local researchers. The above-mentioned course also discusses action and evaluation research as well as quasi-experiments. [30]

Slovenian textbooks and teaching material for methodology courses in the social sciences primarily discuss issues concerning quantitative empirical research. An example of this is Niko TOŠ's work *Methods of Social Science Research* (1975, 1988). While the author also deals with themes which are relevant for qualitative research approaches (for example, participant observation, in-depth interviews, and group discussions) it is clear that the quantitative paradigm predominates in the text as a whole. The fact that the author dedicated one chapter of the book to qualitative research 13 years after the book's first edition is evidence of this (The above-cited chapter was also published in later editions of the book in 1997 and 1998). There he equates qualitative research with action research and in an elemental fashion presents it as an alternative to the quantitative approach. [31]

Like the textbook mentioned above, the *Methodology of Sociology* (FLERE 2000) is also predominantly focused on quantitative methods and on general, epistemological aspects of empirical research in sociology. One chapter is dedicated to the explanation of the differences between quantitative and qualitative methods. In the chapter that deals with concrete research methods the characteristics of the semi-structured interview, case study, qualitative content analysis and participative observation, are outlined. [32]

There exists the only one work in book form, which may be used as a qualitative methodology textbook. This would be the previously mentioned work by Blaž MESEC *Introduction to Qualitative Research in Social Work* (1998). In this work students may find strategies and phases of qualitative research as well as concrete guidelines on how to carry out a research project, and how to prepare and process data. Yet MESEC's book does not succeed in illuminating all issues pertaining to qualitative methodology (for example, epistemological issues and the history and typology of qualitative methods). The problem also lies in the sorts of research cases cited by the author, for they deal with subjects and issues particular to the field of social work. Cultural studies and sociology students would

also need more examples from organizational and institutional life as well as a greater emphasis on linking micro and macro social realities. [33]

Thus a new and up-to-date methodological text is needed which would provide students of the social sciences and Slovenian intellectuals a complete introduction to the issues of qualitative methodology which is, thanks to a recent post-positivist turn and new computer-based programs for processing data resulting from qualitative research, becoming more and more influential in the international social science context. Previously published texts, such as MESEC's work, will subsequently be a sound basis for advanced studies. [34]

5. Recapitulation: the "Slow Motion" Movement toward Post-Positivism

Proceeding from this overview the question could be raised if the trends described above are indicative enough so that we could speak of the movement from Mode 1 ("positivist") to Mode 2 ("post-positivist") in Slovenian social science research. In the 1990s, after the introduction of democracy, when it could be expected that the thematic range of research would expand and that researchers would focus on phenomena such as (local) new elites, decision-making processes, political parties, non-governmental organizations, the research topics were enlarged to a very narrow extent. [35]

As far as applied methods are concerned, we can observe a predominance of unstructured and semi-structured interviews, while the use of biographical methods has only just begun. The application of long-term fieldwork and participant observation is still a rarity. The use of computer-based programs to analyze qualitative data is also only in the early stages. Sociologists also make little use of more ambitious case studies, to say nothing of more in-depth phenomenological studies.[36]

In the last three decades some of the qualitative methods recognized abroad have been used in research conducted in the field of sociology as well as in related fields; at the same time, sociological qualitative research has remained unsystematic and with a lack of continuity. One can explain this in large part in light of the instability of financial resources for this line of research and the related problem of not being able to form stable research teams to implement qualitative research. [37]

Although Slovenian universities' curricula have recently become more accepting of qualitative research, this approach is still kept in the margins. In spite of this fact, the young researchers have shown much interest in the implementation of qualitative research methods. [38]

One of the major steps towards the Mode 2 or post-positivist state has been taken by multidisciplinary research projects; some in the framework of Slovenian social sciences and especially those which have been conveyed in the context of European research programs. [39]

6. Perspectives and Trends

Qualitative methods are gaining more and more recognition in social science research, and are being used also in the context of evaluative research and in combination with computer programs. They are important not only as research instruments in purely research frameworks but also for encouraging action and participatory research in fields such as informal and social teaching ("a learning society"), civil initiatives, the development of a democratic political culture, the revitalization of local communities, solving unemployment, and non-governmental organizations. The qualitative researcher—who must go through training similar to that of a psychoanalyst—who has an understanding of group dynamics, negotiation skills, and a trained attention to detail while being capable of complex thought, is becoming an important actor in inter-cultural communication, solving conflicts, moderating workshops, and leading project groups and research teams. Even Slovenia, which has neither a great nor systematic tradition nor consistency in this regard, boasts some very successful individual models. We will have to act in a more co-operative and synergetic manner. Only in this fashion—as well as with international co-operation—will we be able to compensate for a small critical mass and limited resources. [40]

On the other hand, the reform of study programs, especially the methodological curriculum, is urgently needed. The theory and practice of qualitative research (and triangulation with the quantitative approach) should become an indispensable part of teaching on undergraduate as well as on post-graduate levels. [41]

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