

Qualitative Methods at the Crossroads: Recent Developments in Interpretive Social Research

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Key words:
interpretive
paradigm;
standardization;
creativity;
subjectivity; social
theory

Abstract: Looking at the development of qualitative methods in the long run one can see their successful dissemination across a variety of disciplines. As a consequence of this dissemination, qualitative methods have been institutionalized within the social sciences and beyond. This institutionalization led to an increasing tendency to standardization. Standardization, however, stands in strong contrast to the original *idées directrices* of qualitative methods which have been based on the interpretive paradigm in the social sciences. This contrast constitutes the crossroads at which qualitative methods are required to focus on the role of interpretation, subjectivity, and methodological creativity which constitute their identity.

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1. Introduction

Many still bemoan the marginality of qualitative methods in contemporary research, and some still question the value of their criteria. Nonetheless, over the last 30 years we have seen qualitative methods become an increasingly accepted and integrated part of the canon of methods in the social sciences. Recognition varies across the disciplines. In anthropology, sociology, education, communication studies, and even religious studies, qualitative methods are by now well established on an international basis. In other disciplines, such as psychology and economics, these methods are still fighting for recognition. The reasons for these differences may be found in the basic methodological disposition of the disciplines as well as in various social and institutional aspects linked to theoretical positions, to which I will turn below. [1]

But even though the acceptance of qualitative methods admittedly varies in the social scientific disciplines, one cannot ignore that they are enormously widespread across these disciplines and, moreover, that they are in the midst of a process of *institutionalization*. Qualitative methods are now well established in national as well as international scientific societies. In addition, the various national research associations, such as the German "Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft," the Swiss "Schweizerische Nationalfonds," and the French "Agence Nationale de Recherche," support qualitative research projects in the same way, though not always to the same extent, as standardized social

research. This institutionalization is reflected in the growth of archives for qualitative data (HUSCHKA, KNOBLAUCH, OELLERS & SOLGA, 2013). Finally, even in the labor markets for social scientists, where the imposition of national restrictions is common, a gradual professionalization of qualitative researchers has begun. This development can be seen in the standardization of the curriculum on qualitative research methods at universities and in advanced educational institutions in general, including graduate schools and research centers. These developments explain the rapid growth and respectable size at present of such events as the [Berlin Method Days](#), the qualitative portions of the [Oxford Research Festival](#) and the conferences of the [Qualitative Methods Research Network](#), the third-largest research stream in the European Sociological Association. [2]

Indeed, the recent developments in qualitative methods are so varied and diverse that it is hardly possible for anyone to gain an overview of the entire field. Were one to try to cover the range of methods, their origins and evolution, one might end up with the kind of complex genealogy found in the Old Testament, for example, for the Sons of Noah ([Genesis 10](#)). The sheer complexity of activities in qualitative methods could easily lead one to ignore this or that approach, so that my goal cannot be to attempt such a Sisyphean task. Rather, I want to focus on certain more general features of the recent development of qualitative methods. On this more abstract level, it is, in my view, the tendency toward standardization that is most striking. Moreover, this tendency may collide with one of the most essential bases of qualitative methods, the interpretive paradigm (KELLER, 2012). In discerning this potential problem, I must confess that my perspective is influenced by my own socialization into the qualitative methods, which began in the early 1980s. My text may thus exhibit a certain viewpoint, yet in fields that use qualitative methods, my perspective must not be considered a deficiency but rather a resource. [3]

As the title announces, I do not want to develop the argument in a linear way but rather to divide it into two parts, which correspond to the metaphor of duality implicit in the word "crossroads." [4]

2. Tendencies in Qualitative Social Research

The title of this article, "Qualitative Methods at the Crossroads," has not been chosen solely to attract attention. Following REICHERTZ (2007), I share the view that the development of methods, however varied they may be, tends to follow distinct directions that can be perceived to some degree. [5]

The first development, mentioned previously, is the rapid dissemination of qualitative methods in a range of social scientific disciplines and the liberal arts. This dissemination exhibits at least four traits, which need not be in harmony but rather can come into tension and thus lead to a first crossroad. First, the dissemination of qualitative methods results in their highly complex differentiation. Qualitative methods multiply as a result of differences in subject matter and procedures. In addition, the very course of research typically triggers the variation

of existing methods and the creation of new ones. To give a simple example, interpretive video analysis, which has evolved from visual analysis and conversation analysis, has become a field of research in its own right, one which is, in turn, dividing into various subfields (cf. TUMA, SCHNETTLER & KNOBLAUCH, 2013). Similar developments can be observed in presumably all fields of qualitative research. On the whole, one must assume that the multitude of qualitative methods and their dynamics can no longer be kept under systematic review by any single "expert on qualitative methods." [6]

Because this differentiation extends across different disciplines, there are sociological reasons for variations. In the social sciences, specific qualitative methods are developing for psychology, media research, religious studies, and even theology (for examples in German, cf. AYASS & BERGMANN, 2006; DINTER, HEIMBROCK & SÖDERBLUM, 2007; KNOBLAUCH, 2003). These variants should not be interpreted as mere copies of an original pattern. Instead, they tend to legitimate their procedures, terminologies, and even methodologies within their own disciplines in handbooks, introductions, curricula, and the like. [7]

The ongoing differentiation of qualitative methods is not restricted to certain national research systems; rather, it takes place on a global level (FLICK, VON KARDORFF & STEINKE, 2004). This globalization, however, is not a "democratic" process. We are witnessing, rather, the emergence of hegemonic forms that often, but not always, are embedded in, or at least translated into, the Anglo-Saxon context as a prerequisite for their dissemination. In addition to variants of methods that exist in certain language regions, one may observe local adaptations or "glocalization" of globally distributed methods. It suffices to consider simply the discussion of methods in different European nations and language regions (cf. KNOBLAUCH, FLICK & MAEDER, 2005) to detect the enormous variety of adaptations and the richness of "indigenous" methods that escape global awareness because of language restrictions or lack of access to publications. One example of the variety of adaptations is the German, Italian, or Spanish reception of discourse analysis (cf. for a translated example KELLER, 2013). The international ignorance of, for instance, the enormous dynamics of hermeneutics ("objective hermeneutics," "structural hermeneutics," "social-scientific hermeneutics," "hermeneutic sociology of knowledge," etc.) in Germany (HITZLER, 2002) constitutes a negative example of the hegemonic structure of the international debate about methods. (For examples of the few and recent English translations, cf. REICHERTZ, 2004; SOEFFNER, 1997). [8]

This differentiation is due to still another reason, which lies in the "nature" of qualitative methods: They are not fixed at all. Instead, many qualitative methods are characterized by a continuous accrual process; they are, so to speak, updated continually to such a degree that they even undergo a metamorphosis. A person who has conducted a qualitative research project using an accepted method tends to cultivate these methods. If this cultivation is undertaken in any other, slightly modified, theoretical framework, we are faced with new methods or at least substantial variants of existing methods. This tendency to innovation is certainly quite characteristic of qualitative methods, even if one has to concede

that some presumed "innovations" are due instead to the current demand for innovativeness. The major reason for innovation, however, is the interpretive openness of qualitative methods themselves—a feature I discuss further below. [9]

Obviously there are additional reasons for the differentiation of methods, to which I will also turn below. As a preliminary matter, however, I want to describe the reverse process to differentiation, which may be subsumed under the category of *standardization*. While diversity blossoms, institutional demands, in particular, promote a reduction of diversity. Anyone who writes a research proposal has to rely on methods that are somehow accepted and fixed. Therefore, bureaucratic organizations engaged in science administration, entities that fund scientific research, and presumably also the producers of knowledge themselves tend to canonize certain qualitative methods. This tendency to standardization is supported by the tendency to standardize academic education, particularly with respect to empirical methods. Official definitions of academic curricula and selection of certain textbooks for standardized introductory classes are sought, and the increasingly formalized training in graduate schools requires that methods be taught and applied in a predictable manner, often yielding similarly predictable results. The explosion of the market for textbooks on qualitative methods and the enormously wide distribution of such textbooks illustrate this tendency quite well. [10]

Institutional requirements in academic education and the internationalization of knowledge communication are driving the standardization of qualitative methods. The growing hegemony within global science has, indeed, far-reaching effects. It fosters standardization in a way that may be compared to MERTON's (1968) Matthew effect: "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath" ([Matthew 25:29](#)). While any study written in English will be received and discussed on a worldwide level, many publications in other languages, even excellent works, will remain, so to speak, "structurally provincial." Only the study which is received internationally, including the ways how it is translated literarily (e.g. French "grand theory" or German phenomenology), is likely to be considered of general importance even nationally. This holds true also in those cases in which international circles of debate are sometimes not only smaller but also less dense with respect to communication and reflection than their more "provincial" counterparts (e.g. the various discussions on phenomenology as a resource for qualitative methods). [11]

3. Qualitative Methods and the Interpretive Paradigm

This critique should not be understood to denounce standardization, for it may be inevitable, given that qualitative methods are undergoing institutional adoption. Alas, the unreflective pursuit of standardization is particularly harmful in the case of qualitative methods. The reason for this lies in the theoretical roots of these methods.¹ In turning to this topic, I do not want to address the historical details

¹ Angelika POFERL and Reiner KELLER in Munich and Andrea PLODER in Graz are working on the history of qualitative methods.

but rather to focus on some general traits of the methodological and theoretical orientation that guided me and other representatives of the "qualitative movement" in the phase before its institutionalization, which started in Germany in the 1980s. [12]

The use of qualitative methods was not guided originally by purely "methodological" motivations. Rather, the interest in qualitative methods and their establishment as a distinct set of methods was decidedly linked to the rise of what has been called the interpretive paradigm in the social sciences.² The success of qualitative methods depended on a theoretical paradigm that opposed the then-dominant "normative paradigm" of structuralist theory and systems theory.³ As REICHERTZ (2007) has recently shown, the interpretive paradigm is characterized by its focus on four issues: 1. the subjective dimension of meaning, 2. interactive processes, 3. meaningful structures guiding action, and 4. overarching systems of signification and legitimation. Within the field of qualitative methods, these foci point to three major topics, which I would like to discuss: subjectivity, creativity, and "interpretivity," or susceptibility to interpretation. [13]

These topics are not merely relevant to qualitative methods. Indeed, they have played an important role in the societal and cultural changes of recent decades. The tightly structured post-war society with its stress on order has been subject to the loosening of rules and norms and the increasing relevance of individuality and subjectivity. These changes have affected theoretical paradigms even on the level of social theory and have prompted critiques of the "standardized" methods.⁴ [14]

The theoretical movement involved scholars such as BERGER, CICOUREL, GARFINKEL, GEERTZ, GOFFMAN, GUMPERZ, HYMES, and LUCKMANN.⁵ Qualitative methods were able to spread widely, so to speak, in the wake of the theories developed at that time. It is certainly no historical coincidence that the opposition to structuralist theories united interpretive methods and the rising neo-Marxist theories of the 1960s. It is noteworthy that the latter had been heavily attacking the "technicist" tendencies of the "hypothetico-deductive model" and the corresponding standardized mathematical quantitative methods of social research.⁶ Given that neo-Marxist theories were not very elaborate with respect to methods, it seems that the opposition between qualitative and quantitative methods is rather historically coincidental than grounded in systematic differences between them. [15]

2 For the first formulation of the interpretive paradigm cf. WILSON (1970); for a more recent overview of interpretive approaches cf. KELLER (2012).

3 The essential role of theory in empirical research is described by HIRSCHAUER, KALTHOFF and LINDEMANN (2008).

4 As one of the most important books on the critique of methods cf. CICOUREL (1964).

5 The renaissance of interpretive theories in the 1970s could not prevent the introduction of the "interpretive turn" in some disciplines from being delayed until the late 1980s and 1990s.

6 This second *Methodenstreit* of the early 1960s involved scholars such as ADORNO and POPPER (TOPITSCH 1984).

The historical opposition between qualitative and quantitative social research does not result solely from the opposition of quantitative empirical social researchers to their presumably "impressionistic" interpretive colleagues, as the argument against the lack of quality standards in qualitative research goes. It also results from the lasting effects of the battle against positivism, in which standardized and quantitative researchers have been reproached for allegedly being complicit in the creation of reduced versions of instrumental rationality, and for lacking all critical distance from the social conditions in which they find themselves. [16]

The representatives of qualitative research took a similarly critical stance toward the normative paradigm and its social technology as did researchers, then numerous at universities, who supported critical theory and Marxist and other "alternative" orientations. However, these positions waned and political orientation at universities became less relevant during the 1980s; an increasing number of students attended universities; and method was one of the crucial elements legitimating the social sciences. Accordingly, the basic theoretical assumptions of the interpretive paradigm lost ground to the more pragmatic and institutionalized distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods. [17]

The process of standardization thus entails an additional problem: the increasing estrangement of theory and method. This gulf can lead, on the one hand, to empirical studies devoid of any theory or guided by a random selection of theories and, on the other hand, to attempts to create new "cultural theories" concerning qualitative methods that fail to recognize their theoretical foundation in interpretive theories. [18]

There is no need to stress separately that the standardization of qualitative methods promotes the *thoughtless detachment of theory from empirical research or the arbitrary recombination of empirical research and theory*. Standardization also encourages the importation into qualitative methods of forms of practice that systematically undermine the interpretive style of thought. This holds true for the strong tendency toward the *automatization of interpretation*, a tendency reinforced by various software programs that reduce the demanding and reflexive work of interpretation to the seemingly innocent process of coding and leave what must be interpreted to those who program software. Another deformation of qualitative methods is the practice of forms of coding legitimated by reference to grounded theory methodology, which do not differ at all from coding practices in standardized research, although such research concerns itself at least with the interreliability of codes and coders. One must, of course, concede that the desire to automatize empirical work is reasonable, for many kinds of interpretation demand an immense amount of time and work. This desire is answered by many introductory books that offer easy "how-to" access to qualitative methods. It is, however, precisely a feature of qualitative methods that, because of their origin in the interpretive paradigm, they escape easy, non-reflexive adaptation and present various demands. These demands can be subsumed under the three notions of interpretation, interpretivity, subjectivity, and creativity. [19]

The necessity to *interpret* is almost a logical result of the dissolution of the normative paradigm. As "norms," "values," and "roles" seem to become fixed for a long time, these categories became more and more subject to interpretation, as studies by ethnomethodologists, symbolic interactionists, and other social constructivists have demonstrated since the 1960s. It is precisely this "interpretive work" that is the subject matter of the emerging qualitative paradigm. As a result, categories cherished by the normative paradigms, such as reason, values, role, and norms, lose their position as fundamental notions in sociology and other social sciences. [20]

In addition, one must also consider the role of subjectivity in qualitative research, for subjectivity is not only a topic for poststructuralist theorizing about recent processes of *subjectivization*. The very notion of subjectivity hints at the self-affirmation of the subjects, which is part and parcel of qualitative research, whether by means of neo- or pseudo-neo-phenomenological studies of subjectivity, by the inclusion of political strategies of empowerment as part of qualitative studies, or merely by the symmetrical recognition of the persons studied as actors and interpreters of reality.⁷ [21]

The third feature of qualitative methods that resists standardization links subjectivity and interpretation and adds a critical-creative aspect. I refer here to the creative, sometimes even artistic, aspect of qualitative methods, which has an incalculable workmanlike quality. This crafts(wo)manship is one of the reasons for the "impressionistic" character that qualitative research is supposed to exhibit. It is also the reason for experimentation with various creative techniques as they are expressed, for example, in "performative social sciences" (JONES et al., 2008). The creative aspect of qualitative methods focuses particularly on new forms of presenting research results, which differ from the classical ways to structure and present the results of scientific inquiry. [22]

The role of creativity can be clearly recognized in the context of the "writing culture debate," which sought to reflect, analyze, and re-conceptualize such forms of presentation in ethnography and the social sciences.⁸ Although this debate has been helpful, its effects on practice in the social sciences have been ambiguous. Forms of presentation increasingly resemble non-scientific forms. I do not refer here only to those forms which have been intentionally popularized, but also to those which have been developed for didactic purposes and those which have been adapted from other institutional fields, such as poster and PowerPoint presentations (cf. KNOBLAUCH, 2013). The adaptation of non-scientific forms extends to the use of video, exhibitions, and literary texts, which are, of course, not new to qualitative methods. Experimentation with new forms of presentation corresponds to the increasing differentiation of qualitative research. It is quite understandable, for example, that the qualitative study of popular culture or visual data demands different forms of presentation than the conventional formats of scientific articles, essays, or scientific monographs. [23]

7 I have examined the notion of subjectivity and its role in interpretive methodology elsewhere (KNOBLAUCH, 2008).

8 For an overview of the debate, cf. BACHMANN-MEDICK (2009, pp.144ff.).

It seems that the crucial need for adequate forms of presenting knowledge in scientific terms, despite its importance, is less intensively addressed than the need to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge to new popular audiences and recipients. This economic orientation is not new for qualitative methods. From the very beginning, there have been "applied" methods to satisfy economic and organizational imperatives. While qualitative research has been conducted primarily in scientific institutions and universities, it slowly is moving into economic institutions, as in qualitative market research (BUBER & HOLZMÜLLER, 2007). This movement improves the occupational outlook of qualitative researchers, but simultaneously introduces into qualitative research economic imperatives that should not be part of it or may even contradict it. This same trend holds sway in the political sector, which demands both organizational consultancy and public education. These demands result, on the one hand, in the popularization of qualitative methods. In the democratic context of public understanding of science they require, on the other hand, a new form of presentation or even of participative doing of qualitative methods. Additionally, the adaptation of qualitative methods to cultural studies and the creative industries tends to produce a hybrid between social science and art. As attractive as this hybrid may be with respect to some of its aesthetic products, there is a real danger that, in the end, by trying to appeal to both scientific and artistic standards, it fails to live up to either. [24]

Given the intensity of debates on the presentation of scientific research results and on qualitative methods, one should not forget that we are talking not only about presentation but also about the forms of knowledge and practices to which they apparently refer. As manifold as these forms of knowledge and practice may be, qualitative methods always tend to exhibit a form of artisanship that somehow differs from the crafts(wo)manship mentioned above. While craft relates to the collection of data, the management and analysis of data according to a certain method, that is, the "application" of method, usually implies some form of "artfulness" that transcends the mechanical, an artfulness of both presentation and analysis. It is probably this artisanship that accounts for the continuous shift and transformation of qualitative methods. [25]

The gap between craft and art, between *techné* and *ars*, is also to be found in quantitative social research. Owing to the relevance of subjectivity, artfulness of research is an explicit topic in a discussion of qualitative methods. One may, indeed, say that qualitative methods are characterized by an intense methodological debate, an immense reflexivity. Consider, as examples, the discussions about presentation, the debate on interpretation and hermeneutics, and the fights over the feasibility of visual analysis. These events sometimes lead to the assumption that methods involve nothing more than methodological debates, some of which even question the very possibility of empirical research. [26]

In the face of these debates, grounded theory methodology has certainly contributed a kind of basic consensual methodology that may be referred to from

all vantage points of the diversified qualitative field.⁹ The situation of qualitative methods, however, has changed significantly since the early days of grounded theory methodology. Within and across various interpretive approaches, there has been an accumulation of considerable knowledge that draws on specific analytical notions and methodological conventions, so that research is done within a set of basic categories, forms of data gathering, and methods of analysis. This holds true for various brands of ethnomethodology, such as conversation analysis or workplace studies; for various hermeneutic approaches, such as objective hermeneutics; and for the analysis of communicative genres. Studies in such areas work within the frame of grounded theories and on the basis of a set of previous empirical studies of similar phenomena. For this reason, the "post-qualitative theorism" appears inadequate, for it does not even do justice to existing methodological debates and discussions.¹⁰ (Interestingly, this theorism derives from a tradition of research used to reject theory.) Categories, notions, and models in qualitative research are not located in a free-floating space, but emerge from lasting debates, particularly in the frame of the interpretive paradigm. Therefore, attempts to re-establish theory should take into account the difference between the theory that is already incorporated in the analytical apparatus of qualitative research and the theoretical attempts of those who seem to be unaware of this fact. If one wants to claim to be scientific, it seems important to draw this distinction in order to discriminate between innovations in qualitative methods and mere fads and fashions. [27]

As far as the methodology of qualitative methods is concerned, it is imperative to have a reflexive methodology that draws on theoretical notions and also reflects implicit theoretical assumptions. By reflexive methodology, I mean that the ways we work with data as well as the ways results are produced are observed and reflected upon instead of merely being formulated *ex post facto* in the armchair.¹¹ In addition to reflection on the empirically observed practice of research, including the practice of theory, such a methodology implies the adaption and application of one's reflections into one's own research. This means that the social sciences should observe their own actions in the same way that they observe the natural sciences.¹² It is this latter type of reflection that seems to me a desideratum of qualitative research that is aware of its interpretive heritage. [28]

4. Conclusion

When writing about a crossroads at the beginning of this article, I had in mind a context in which qualitative methods confront two challenges. With respect to the processes of reversal of differentiation in the academic system, they must maintain a minimal amount of scientific autonomy. The demands posed by the economy, politics, and the public are no longer external to academic research but

9 In addition to the path-breaking works by GLASER and STRAUSS (1967), one should mention newer contributions such as that by CLARKE (2005).

10 On post-qualitative theorism cf. KELLER (2014).

11 I have proposed such a reflexive methodology in KNOBLAUCH (2004).

12 This is proposed, e.g. by CAMIC, GROSS and LAMONT (2011); cf. HIRSCHAUER (2004) and TUMA (2012).

instead are being internalized by new curricula, evaluations, and new public management. Therefore, as scientists we are confronted with the question whether we want a kind of science that is oriented toward its own standards and its own "state of research" or one that focuses on external demands. The fact that often we are neither able nor willing to pose this question may be in itself one aspect of the problem. [29]

The increased differentiation and standardization described here are certainly linked to the success of qualitative research, which has become part of the "business of science" so wisely predicted by WEBER (1995 [1919]). However, WEBER's pessimistic prediction of the iron cage also applies now to science and possibly also to qualitative methods, as knowledge workers must dutifully fulfill the tasks assigned to them, especially as the extension of science in a knowledge society to politics, the economy, and the "audience" accelerates the process of standardization. This trend is expressed in the demands for calculability and for easy "transfer" of knowledge about the "how-to" of qualitative methods. In addition, we see an increased reification of knowledge, which must be traded as a commodity in a knowledge society (WARD, 2012). [30]

As problematic as this tendency toward standardization may be, one can hardly evade it without undoing the institutionalization of qualitative methods. Besides, the tendency need not involve all parts of qualitative methods. While some areas of qualitative research that contribute to the economy, politics, and various collective actors outside science, including "applied science," are subject to this tendency, it must be the goal of academic research to keep these methods open to critique. In order to do so, qualitative research must orient itself toward common methodological standards that are not covered by grounded theory methodology, which is still very basic. Because the interpretive paradigm provides the historical frame for qualitative methods, it can also serve to establish a theoretical orientation of its scientific methodology. Moreover, the dispersion of qualitative methods into innumerable disciplines may yield a theoretical paradigm that will allow such methods to become a transdisciplinary field of study in their own right. [31]

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Citation

Knoblauch, Hubert (2014). Qualitative Methods at the Crossroads: Recent Developments in Interpretive Social Research [31 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 14(3), Art. 12, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1303128>.