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Review:

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Michael D. Myers & David Avison (Eds.) (2002).
Qualitative Research in Information Systems.
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Abstract: This book is a collection of 12 articles published in 1983-1996 in various management research journals, to which the editors' introductory chapter is added. It brings to readers outside of organizational psychology an overview of different kinds of systemic thinking that have developed in that area since the invention of the magical term "information systems" in the 1960s. The book shows the viability of qualitative methodology in the study of objects of investigation of high levels of social complexity. Following the ideas expressed in the book, I argue that the juxtaposition of qualitative versus quantitative methods as if these are mutually opposed choices for researchers is misleading. Instead, the qualitative study of systemically organized single cases—methodology rather than methods—is the direction needed for all methodological thinking.

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1. The Magic Word—INFORMATION SYSTEMS

While reading this book one gets the understanding that much more than the fashionable talk about Information Systems (IS) is at stake. As the editors of the volume point out, the appearance of this book is due to the increasing interest in qualitative methods of researchers and practitioners in the area of management. [1]

The management of organizations is an inherently symbolic activity, a far cry from the assumed rationality of business. As HIRSCHEIM and NEWMAN (1991; also Chapter 13) amply illustrate, all talk about management tasks in organizations is filled with metaphors and magical thinking. Somehow, the creators of information systems operate as "high priests" of the magic of contemporary "information miracles"—yet the users of these miracles are rather ordinary human beings. We live under the influence of information magic. [2]

Social complexity gives rise to new magic. It is in the case of complex organizations that fashionable new labels like IS emerge and proliferate. The complexity of organizations and their goals render the over-trained quantitative habits of social researchers moot, and the road to qualitative perspectives is wide

open. So, for once, applied issues of management happen to bring in basic social sciences to look for adequate solutions that cannot be provided by their methodological myopia of obsession with quantification. It is important to emphasize that the mundane needs of management tasks reveal a complex interdependent system of human action. [3]

Thus,

> "... organizations have goals and ... they behave in ways that are consistent with achieving these goals. For many businesses, a major goal is to achieve a specified profit subject to certain constraints. System purposes ... are: to rationalize work (achieve predictable outputs with consistent units of input—a goal of many operational systems), to enhance managerial decision-making and planning, to control and motivate the performance of employees toward agreed-upon goals, and to improve communication and coordination among people in the organization or between the organization and aspects of its environment (customers, suppliers, competitors, etc)" (MARKUS, 1983/2002, p.23). [4]

All this is applied social and organizational psychology, pure and simple. Yet management researchers can get away more easily with projecting goal-oriented actions to organizations than psychologists do in recognizing the goals-oriented nature of human psyche. Organizations are social agents that operate to reach their goals, and ISs provide the new toolbox they are using. [5]

There is nothing magical about the IS, even if people talk about it in fascinated terms. It is merely a new and fashionable term that came into use in the 1960s. Still, growing popularity of the IS coincides with the crumbling of the rigid quantification norms in the social sciences. Instead of large samples and standardized questionnaires we see the proliferation of focus groups, ethnographies, narrative analyses, etc. What IS leads to is of course valuable to science—it elevates the study of single systems in their real-life dynamics to the status of main targets of investigation. As such, issues relevant for research on management highlight in our time that those complex cases of neurological patients that appeared to psychology after each war of the 20th century—human psychological systems are to be studied holistically—as systems—and their uniqueness is a proof of the universality of the principles by which these single cases operate. Our contemporary advancement of idiographic science (MOLENAAR & VALSINER, 2005) is the basic sciences' counterpart to this. [6]

New needs create new ways of thinking about methodology. Thanks to shifts in focus in applied fields such as management or medicine (BIBACE, LAIRD, NOLLER & VALSINER, 2005) the rigidity of traditional social sciences may be overcome. We can see a major qualitative revolution in the methods of contemporary social sciences. Under different disguises the "old" traditions of quantitative research traditions are left behind, and replaced by qualitative procedures under the label of action research, critical or grounded theory. It is therefore very revealing to see all these new developments put into place in an area that usually is rather distant from the concerns of social sciences. [7]

2. The Book as a Collection

Qualitative research in information systems is really a synopsis—12 of its 13 chapters have been published before, in the period 1983-1996. Its coverage is a cross-section of the ideas that circulated in the area of management studies over a decade ago, and which have retained their prominence. The chapters in the book are devoted to choosing appropriate IS research methodologies (GALLIERS and LAND, Chapter 2), on power and politics in IS implementation (MARKUS, Chapter 3), assumptions of researchers in IS studies (ORLIKOWSKI and BAROUDI, Chapter 4), interpretive methods in case analysis (WALSHAM, Chapter 6), action research in organizations (BASKERVILLE and WOOD-HARPER, Chapter 8). Ethnographic techniques have their place in the book (HARVEY and MYERS, Chapter 10), as well as a look at the development of organizations (ORLIKOWSKI, Chapter 11). All these chapters are republications, but the editors, in their introductory chapter, do a good job in situating the different perspectives within a number of conventional typologies. They carefully chart out the general philosophical backgrounds of the different contributions. [8]

Thus,

> "[p]ositivists generally assume the reality is objectively given and can be described by measurable properties, which are independent of the observer (researcher) and his or her instruments. Positivist studies generally attempt to test theory, in an attempt to increase the predictive understanding of phenomena." (p.6) [9]

In contrast,

> "[i]nterpretive researchers start out with the assumption that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings. Interpretive studies generally attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them ..." (p.6) [10]

Finally,

> [c]ritical researchers assume that social reality is historically constituted and that it is produced and reproduced by people. Although people can consciously act to change their social and economic circumstances, critical researchers recognize that their ability to do so is constrained by various forms of social, cultural, and political domination." (p.7) [11]

Thus, there is little new under the sun: different perspectives of relating to the world show their foundational nature in the area of management as they do elsewhere. These different philosophical backgrounds are all represented in the volume, and the editors make a point about all three being open to the use of qualitative methods. This makes good sense, since methods are building blocks of the wider methodological web. A research method is explained as "a strategy of enquiry which moves from the underlying philosophical assumptions to

research design and data collection" (p.7). The set of methods—action research, case study, ethnography, and grounded theory—are all used by the different philosophies in their efforts to create knowledge about information systems. Finally, hermeneutic and narrative techniques are used to interpret the data collected. [12]

The theme of the centrality of the case study as the core for IS analyses is prominent in the volume. It makes sense—all management researchers need to keep their focus on the reality of their target phenomena (organizations). Probably the measurement of the value of new ISs, in very quantified terms of "profits", leads the researchers to keep the ties of their studies with the systemic nature of organizations. For instance, in contrast with the analysis of businesses, there is no "profit measure" in the analysis of children's development. So, researchers of management have boldly, and from as long as three decades ago, rejected multivariate research methods due to the restrictions on distributions, large sample sizes, and limits on interpretability of quantitatively analyzed data (BENBASAT, GOLDSTEIN & MEAD, 1987—see Chapter 5, p.79). It is obvious that a study based on a "large random sample of organizations" can reveal nothing about the ways in which each of the organizations functions. The issue at stake is not qualitative (in contrast to quantitative) approaches, but the need for systemic analysis of functioning organizational systems. This means the book is missing its stated aims—instead of qualitative methods it actually deals with issues of systemic methodology. This failure is in a way its success, and it is methodology in its entirety that matters. [13]

In some respects, the book is actually a handbook of qualitative research perspectives of systemic analyses of particular organizations. Its value is in transcending the usual narrow focus on evaluation of methods (as separated from methodology—BRANCO & VALSINER, 1997). It seems that the complexity of the phenomena of IS in management tasks makes such holistic thinking possible. One can observe examples of such thinking all through the book. Thus, Ojelanki NGWENJAMA (Chapter 7—NGWENJAMA, 1991) elaborates the actions of critical theory proponents in a scheme reminiscent of the whole methodology cycle (pp.121, 123, 125). Critical theorists are positive actors: they try to bring about the improvement of the whole human condition. Allen LEE (Chapter 9—LEE, 1989) demonstrates how a single-case study of an organization's IS actually fits with the model of basic science. This should be of no surprise for anybody who accepts Kurt LEWIN's oft-quoted remark that there is nothing more practical than a good theory. It is another matter what kind of theory it is—and how it maps onto the phenomena. At the more phenomenological end, Richard BOLAND (Chapter 12—BOLAND, 1991) demonstrates how different "world hypotheses" a la PEPPER enter into the interpretational evaluation of managers who easily went far beyond the given information and projected their own meanings into the evaluation tasks. The mutuality between thinking with numbers and reasoning on the basis of values was found to be the rule in managers' decision making. [14]

If this is the case, then the dispute between qualitative and quantitative perspectives in psychology is an artifact of the discipline's moving away from the

phenomena it attempts to study (CAIRNS, 1986), as well as of turning existing methods into de facto theories (GIGERENZER, 1991). If these phenomena become restored in the discipline it becomes obvious that the forms of the phenomena have spatial and temporal spreads that cannot be represented by numerical signs in most of the cases. This axiomatic premise resolves the opposition between numerical and interpretational data derivation as it views different kinds of data as differently suited to represent different phenomena. Quite clearly the presentation of the quantitative and qualitative perspectives as if these were irreconcilable opposites is a social artifact of power relations in scientific organizations. All human reasoning—including the part that uses quantified tools—is in principle qualitative. [15]

Concerning sociology, Charles TILLY has emphasized

> "Even when [research] eventually produces numbers ... the bulk of sociological research involves making nonquantitative observations before and quantitative transformation or analysis of the evidence. For all their final quantitative form, interview-based surveys begin not with numbers but with conversations between interviewers and respondents. Even demographers who start their work with published vital statistics are actually drawing their evidence from previously written registrations of individual births, deaths, and marriages, each one described in its particularity." (TILLY, 2004, p.595) [16]

The situation is similar in psychology—behind each and every question asked in a standard personality test (DIRIWÄCHER, VALSINER & SAUCK, 2004) or in any rating scale (WAGONER & VALSINER, 2005) remains a complex process of meaning-making that is unique and general at the same time. That fluid process is perhaps best modeled by a new kind of field theory that is qualitative in nature —even of it allows for insertion of quantitative terms. [17]

3. How Does One Go Beyond Qualitative Methods?

I finish reading (and re-reading) this book with mixed feelings. On the one hand, the book is clear testimony of the productivity of single-system qualitative analyses of organizations. As such, its value for social scientists in other areas of social sciences is in its pioneering practice. On the other hand, what is covered is a potpourri of different methods intermingled with general concerns with methodology and applied issues, a combination that is quite eclectic. And that is not good for science, as science entails systematic linkages between methods, theory, data, and phenomena. Eclectic mixing has no place in it. [18]

In summary—Qualitative research in information systems is worth reading carefully even if one's area is far from organizational psychology and issues of management. It provides an overview of an area of methodological thinking that is otherwise difficult to access beyond the applied area of IS analysis in the management of organizations. Does it provide new breakthroughs? Probably not, but as a collection of papers it is meant to consolidate the existing knowledge so

that readers are likely to achieve that. The last word—and deed—remains in the minds of the readers. [19]

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