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Quality, Quantity and Knowledge Interests: Avoiding Confusions

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Imagine a football match. Two opposing players run after the ball, and suddenly one of them falls to the ground, rolling over several times. Half the spectators whistle and shout, and the other half are relieved that the potential danger is over.

We may analyse this competitive social situation in the following terms. First, there are the actors: the football players, 11 on each side, highly trained, skilled and coordinated in their roles for the purpose of winning the match; and the officials, namely the referee and the linesmen. This is the 'field of action'.

Then we have the spectators. Most of the spectators are loyal supporters of one or other of the teams. Very few do not identify with either of the teams. However, there may be one or two spectators who are new to football, and are just curious. The terraces of the spectators are the 'field of naive observation' – naive in the sense that the spectators are basically enjoying events on the pitch, and are almost a part of the game itself, which they may experience almost as if they were players. Through their loyalty to one of the teams, they think and feel with a partisan perspective. When one of the players falls, this is interpreted by his supporters as indicating foul play, while for the opposing fans it is a self-inflicted and theatrical stumble.

Finally, there is the position from which we describe the situation as we do here. We are curious about the tribal nature of the event, of the field of

action, and of the spectators under observation. Ideally this description requires a detached analysis of the situation, with no direct involvement with either team. Our indirect involvement may be in football in general – its present problems and its future. This we call the 'field of systematic observation'. From this position, we may be able to assemble three forms of evidence: what is going on on the field, the reactions of the spectators, and the institution of football as a branch of sport, show business or commerce. Avoiding direct involvement requires precautions: (a) a trained awareness of the consequences that arise from personal involvement; and (b) a commitment to assessing one's observations methodically and in public.

Such observations with different degrees of detachment are the problematic of social research. By analogy we can readily extend this 'ideal type' analysis of what we call a 'complete research situation' (Cranach et al., 1982: 50) to other social activities, such as voting, working, shopping and making music, to mention just a few. We can study the field of action, and ask what the events are in the field (the object of study); we may subjectively experience each event – what is happening, how it feels, and what are the motives for it. This naive observation is analogous to the perspective of the actors as self-observers. Finally, we focus on the subject – object relation that arises from the comparison of the actor perspective and the observer perspective within a larger context, and ask how events relate to people's experience of them.

Adequate coverage of social events requires a multitude of methods and data: methodological pluralism arises as a methodological necessity. Recording the action field requires (a) the systematic observation of events; inferring the meanings of these events from the (self-) observations of the actors and spectators requires (b) techniques of interviewing; and interpreting the material traces that are left behind by the actors and the spectators requires (c) systematic analysis.

Research design: data elicitation, reduction and analysis

It is useful to distinguish four methodological dimensions in social research. These dimensions describe the research process in terms of combinations of elements across all four dimensions. First, there is the research design according to the strategic principles of research, such as the sample survey, participant observation, case studies, experiments and quasi-experiments. Secondly, there are the data elicitation methods, such as interviewing, observation and the collection of documents. Thirdly, there are the data analytic procedures, such as content analysis, rhetorical analysis, discourse analysis and statistics. And finally, knowledge interests refer to Habermas's classification into control, consensus building and emancipation of the subjects of study. The four dimensions are elaborated in Table 1.1.

Much methodological confusion and many false claims arise from the confounding of the qualitative/quantitative distinction of data eliciting and

Table 1.1 *The four dimensions of the research process*

Design principles	Data elicitation	Data analysis	Knowledge interests
Case study	Individual interviewing	*Formal*	
Comparative study	Questionnaire	Statistical modelling	
Sample survey	Focus groups	Structuralist analysis	Control and prediction
Panel survey	Film		Consensus building
Experiment	Audiovisual recordings	*Informal*	Emancipation and
Participant observation	Systematic observation	Content analysis	empowerment
Ethnography	Collection of documents	Coding	
	Recording of sounds	Indexing	
		Semiotical analysis	
		Rhetorical analysis	
		Discourse analysis	

analysis with principles of research design and knowledge interests. It is quite possible to conceive an experimental design accommodating in-depth interviewing to elicit data. Equally, a case-study design may incorporate a survey questionnaire together with observational techniques, for example to study a business corporation in trouble. A large-scale survey of an ethnic minority group may include open questions for qualitative analysis, and the results may serve the emancipatory interests of the minority group. Or we can think of a random survey of a population, collecting data through focus group interviews. However, as the last example shows, certain combinations of design principles and data eliciting methods occur less frequently because of their resource implications. We contend that all four dimensions should be viewed as relatively independent choices in the research process, and the choice of qualitative or quantitative is primarily a decision of data eliciting and analysis methods, and only secondarily one of research design or knowledge interests.

While our examples have included survey research, in this volume we deal mainly with data eliciting and analysis procedures within the practice of qualitative research, that is, non-numerical research.

Modes and mediums of representation: types of data

Two distinctions about data may be helpful in this book. The world as we know and experience it, that is, the represented world and not the world in itself, is constituted in communication processes (Berger and Luckmann, 1979; Luckmann, 1995). Social research therefore rests on social data – data about the social world – which are the outcome of, and are realized in, communication processes.

In this book we distinguish two modes of social data: informal and formal communication. Furthermore, we distinguish three media out of which data can be constructed: text, image and sound materials (see Table 1.2). Informal communication has few explicit rules: people can talk, draw or sing in any way they like. That there are few explicit rules does not mean that rules do not exist, and it may be that the very focus of social research is

Table 1.2 *Modes and media*

Medium/mode	Informal	Formal
Text	Interviews	Newspapers Radio programmes
Image	Children's drawings Telephone drawings	Pictures Photographs
Sound	Spontaneous singing Soundscapes	Musical scripts Sound rituals
'Biased', 'false' or staged accounts	Strategic noise	False claims to representation

to uncover the hidden order of the informal world of everyday life (see Myers, Chapter 11 in this volume, on conversation analysis). In social research we are interested in how people spontaneously express themselves and talk about what is important to them, and how they think about their actions and those of others. Informal data are constructed less according to the rules of competence such as govern text writing, painting or musical composition, and more on the spur of the moment, or under the influence of the researcher. The problem arises that the interviewees tell what they think the researcher would like to hear. We need to recognize false accounts, which may say more about the researcher and the research process than about the researched.

On the other hand, there are acts of communication that are highly formal in the sense that competence requires specialist knowledge. People need to be trained to write articles for a newspaper, to generate pictures for an advertisement, or to produce an arrangement for a brass band or a symphony orchestra. A competent person has mastered the rules of the trade, sometimes in order to break them productively, which is called innovation. Formal communication follows the rules of the trade. The fact that the researcher uses the resulting traces, such as a newspaper article, for social research is unlikely to influence the act of communication: it makes no difference to what the journalist wrote. In this sense data based on traces are unobtrusive. However, a second-order problem arises in that the communicators may claim to represent a social group that, in reality, they do not represent. The social scientist must recognize these false claims of representation.

Formal data reconstruct the ways in which social reality is represented by a social group. A newspaper represents the world for a group of people in an accepted way, otherwise people would not buy it. In this context the newspaper becomes an indicator of their worldview. The same may be true for pictures that people consider interesting and desirable, or music that is appreciated as beautiful. What a person reads, looks at, or listens to places them in a certain category, and may indicate what the person may do in the future. Categorizing the present and at times predicting future trajectories is the quest of all social research. In this book we focus almost exclusively on the former issue: the categorization problem.

The philosophy of this book assumes that there is no 'one best way' of doing social research: there is no good reason for us all to become 'pollsters' (people who conduct opinion polls), nor should we all become 'focusers' (people who conduct focus groups). The purpose of this book is to overcome the 'law of instrument' (Duncker, 1935), according to which a little boy who only knows a hammer considers that everything is in need of a pounding. By analogy, neither the survey questionnaire nor the focus group is the royal road for social research. This route can, however, be found through an adequate awareness of different methods, an appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses, and an understanding of their use for different social situations, types of data and research problems.

We have now established that social reality can be represented in informal or formal ways of communicating, and that the medium of communication can be texts, images or sound materials. In social research we may want to consider all of these as relevant in some way or another. This is what we hope to clarify.

Qualitative versus quantitative research

There has been a lot of discussion about the differences between quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative research deals with numbers, uses statistical models to explain the data, and is considered 'hard' research. The best-known prototype is opinion-poll research. By contrast, qualitative research avoids numbers, deals with 'interpreting' social realities, and is considered 'soft' research. The best-known prototype is probably the depth interview. These differences are displayed in Table 1.3. Much effort has been invested in juxtaposing quantitative and qualitative research as competing paradigms of social research, to the extent that people have built careers in one or the other, often polemicizing on the superiority of hard over soft or soft over hard research. Publishers have been quick to spot a market and have established book series and journals with the effect of perpetuating this distinction.

It is fair to say that much quantitative social research is centred around the social survey and the questionnaire, supported by SPSS and SAS as standard statistical software packages. This has set the standards of methodological training at universities, so that the term 'methodology' has come to mean 'statistics' in many fields of social science. In parallel, a large

Table 1.3 *Differences between quantitative and qualitative research*

	Strategy	
	Quantitative	Qualitative
Data	Numbers	Texts
Analysis	Statistics	Interpretation
Prototype	Opinion polling	Depth interviewing
Quality	Hard	Soft

business sector has developed, offering quantitative social research for a multitude of purposes. But recent enthusiasm for qualitative research has successfully challenged the simple equation of social research and quantitative methodology; and a space has reopened for a less dogmatic view of methodological matters – an attitude that was common among the pioneers of social research (see, for example, Lazarsfeld, 1968).

In our own efforts, both in research and in teaching social research methods, we are trying to find a way of bridging the fruitless polemic between two seemingly competing traditions of social research. We pursue this objective on the basis of a number of assumptions, which are as follows.

No quantification without qualification

The measurement of social facts hinges on categorizing the social world. Social activities need to be distinguished before any frequency or percentage can be attributed to any distinction. One needs to have a notion of qualitative distinctions between social categories before one can measure how many people belong to one or the other category. If one wants to know the colour distribution in a field of flowers, one first needs to establish the set of colours that are in the field; then one can start counting the flowers of a particular colour. The same is true for social facts.

No statistical analysis without interpretation

We think it odd to assume that qualitative research has a monopoly on interpretation, with the parallel assumption that quantitative research reaches its conclusions quasi-automatically. We ourselves have not conducted any numerical research without facing problems of interpretation. The data do not speak for themselves, even if they are highly processed with sophisticated statistical models. In fact, the more complex the model, the more difficult is the interpretation of the results. Claiming the 'hermeneutic circle' of interpretation, according to which better understanding comes from knowing more about the field of research, is for qualitative researchers a rhetorical move, but one that is rather specious. What the discussion on qualitative research has achieved is to demystify statistical sophistication as the sole route to significant results. The prestige attached to numerical data has such persuasive power that in some contexts poor data quality is masked, and compensated for, by numerical sophistication. However, statistics as a rhetorical device does get around the problem of 'garbage in, garbage out'. In our view, it is the great achievement of the discussion on qualitative methods that it has refocused attention in research and training away from analysis and towards the issues of data quality and data collection.

It seems that the distinction between numerical and non-numerical research is often confused with another distinction, namely that between formalization and non-formalization of research (see Table 1.4). The polemic

Table 1.4 *The formalization and non-formalization of research*

	Quantitative	Qualitative
No formalization	Descriptive frequencies	Citations, descriptions, anecdotes
Formalization	Statistical modelling, e.g. an introduction book	Graph-theoretical modelling, e.g. Abell (1987)

around these types of research is often conflated with the problem of formalism, and based on the methodological socialization of the researcher. Formalism involves abstractions from the concrete context of research, thus introducing a distance between the observation and the data. In a sense, formalism is a general-purpose abstraction available for treating many kinds of data providing certain conditions are satisfied, such as independence of measures, equal variance and so on. The abstract nature of formalism involves such specialization that it can lead to a total disinterest in the social reality represented by the data. It is often this 'emotional detachment' that is resented by researchers of other persuasions, rather than the numbers themselves. However, as we will show below, this is to do with a particular research method, but can be more fruitfully considered in the larger context of knowledge interests. Numerical research has a large repertoire of statistical formalisms at its disposal, while the equivalent repertoire in qualitative research is still rather underdeveloped – despite the fact that its oft-invoked ancestor, structuralism, was rather keen on formalisms (see, for example, Abell, 1987).

Methodological pluralism within the research process: beyond the law of instrument

An unfortunate consequence of the focus in research training on numerical data has been a premature closure on the data collection phase in the research process. With many people competent in handling numerical data, the data collection process is quickly reduced to the industrial routines of questionnaire design and survey sampling, as if this were the only way to conduct social research. Without doubt, much has been achieved in refining these procedures over the years, and the survey's status as the most important social research method is justified because of this. However, nothing justifies its status as the sole instrument of social research. Here we are in danger of succumbing to the 'law of instrument': give a boy a hammer and all things in the world need pounding.

What is needed is a more holistic view of the process of social research, to include defining and revising a problem, conceptualizing it, collecting data, analysing data and writing up the results. Within this process, different methodologies have different contributions to make. We need a clearer notion of the functional strengths and weaknesses of different strands of methods, and of different methods within any one strand.

Time ordering

One way of describing the functionality of different methods is to order them in a design time-line. Traditionally, qualitative research was considered only at the exploratory stage of the research process (pre-design), to explore qualitative distinctions in order to develop measurements, or to get a 'feel' for the research field. More recent formulations consider qualitative research as equally relevant after the survey, to guide the analysis of the survey data, or to support its interpretation with more fine-grained observations (post-design). More extensive designs consider two parallel streams of research, either simultaneously or in oscillating sequences (parallel design; before-and-after design). Finally, qualitative research can now be considered to be a self-contained research strategy without any functional connection to survey or other quantitative research (stand-alone). Qualitative research is seen as an autonomous research endeavour in the context of a research programme with a series of different projects.

The stand-alone function of qualitative research has a weakness that we try to address with this book. While it is possible to consider numerical and non-numerical research as autonomous endeavours, the problem with qualitative research is that it is a 'didactic nightmare'. Compared with the numerical research tradition founded on sampling, the questionnaire and statistical analysis, qualitative researchers, and those who want to become qualitative researchers, find very little procedural clarity and guidance in the literature. Although this is slowly changing as the critical mass of like-minded researchers grows, much of the literature is still preoccupied with demarcating the legitimate territory of this autonomous methodological path. This legitimizing rhetoric has led to an epistemological hypertrophy, producing definitions of positions and counter-positions in a competitive field with more obscurantism and jargon than clarity, and ultimately has been of very little help when it comes to knowing what to do when doing qualitative research. Up to now we have much support for 'feeling good' in the face of traditional critique, but little critical self-observation.

Independent discourse of 'standards of good practice'

The didactic and practical advantage of numerical research is its procedural clarity and its developed discourse on quality in the research process. A quality discourse serves various functions in research: (a) to establish a basis for self-criticism, (b) to demarcate good from bad practice by serving as standards of peer review, (c) to gain credibility in the context of publicly accountable research, and (d) to serve as a didactic tool in the training of students. Rather than imitating quantitative research to the letter, qualitative research needs to develop *functional equivalents*. In order to strengthen the autonomy and credibility of qualitative research, we need clear procedures and standards to identify good and bad practice, both by examples and by abstract criteria. This book makes a contribution in this direction.

Rhetorical elements of social research

Historically, science and rhetoric have had an uneasy relationship. Rhetoric was regarded by scientific pioneers as a form of verbal embellishment that needed to be avoided if one was to reach the truth of the matter: consider the motto of the Royal Society of London, *nullius in verba*. This scientific ideal of the description and explanation of nature without recourse to rhetorical means is increasingly challenged by the realist view of what is going on in communication among scientists and between scientists and other sections of the public (Gross, 1990). The 'ought' of science is clouding the 'is' of science. An essential element of scientific activity is 'communicating', and communicating involves persuading listeners that some things are the case and others are not. Persuasion leads us into the traditional sphere of rhetoric as the 'art of persuasion'. Hence, we consider social scientific research as a form of rhetoric with particular means and rules of engagement.

Rhetorical analysis postulates the 'three musketeers' of persuasion: logos, pathos and ethos (see Leach, Chapter 12 in this volume). Logos refers to the logic of pure argument, and the kinds of arguments used. Pathos refers to the kinds of appeal and concession made to the audience, taking into account the social psychology of emotions. Ethos involves the implicit and explicit references made to the status of the speaker, which establish his or her legitimacy and credibility for saying what is being said. We would therefore assume that any presentation of research results is a mixture of the three basic elements of persuasion, as researchers want to convince their peers, politicians, funding sources, or even their subjects of study of the truth-value and significance of their findings. In the context of communicating research results, the scientific ideal of a rhetoric of pure argumentative rationality, without pathos or ethos, is an illusion.

This perspective has several useful implications for our problem of qualitative research. First, we feel free to consider social research methodology as the rhetorical means by which the social sciences can strengthen their particular form of persuasion. The historical rise and trajectory of this form of rhetoric in the public sphere of modern society are historical and sociological problems in themselves. Secondly, we are liberated from the epistemological obfuscation that burdens discussions of methods, and we can concentrate on developing credible communications within the rules of the game of science. Thirdly, we can treat quantitative and qualitative research equally in these terms. Fourthly, rhetoric is developed in the context of public speaking and writing, which reminds us that method and procedure constitute a form of public accountability for research, which must be lived up to. And finally, the scientific ideal is not lost but is preserved in a collective motivation to build and to maintain the particular form of scientific persuasion – that is, to maintain a rhetoric that we bias towards logos by reducing the ethos and pathos in communication. The rules of method and procedures for gaining and presenting evidence in public protect us from over-reliance on authority (ethos), and from mere

pandering to the audience – from telling them what they want to hear (pathos). Serving neither authority nor audience remains a key value of any research that deserves the label. This is only relevant in contrast to other forms of rhetoric in public life, which differ in their mixture of logos, ethos and pathos. The worlds of politics, art and literature, the media and the law courts encourage and cultivate forms of persuasions that are different from the form used in science. Note that 'different from science' does not mean 'irrelevant': news-making, legal judgment and gossiping are important forms of communication, however much they differ in their mixture of logos, pathos and ethos from what would normally be considered scientific communication.

So we consider methods and procedures of gathering and presenting evidence as essential for social scientific research. They define the particular rhetorical bias that demarcates the scientific from other public activities, and they place research squarely within the public sphere and subject it to the demands of accountability. Methods and procedures are the scientific way of being publicly accountable for evidence. However, we have to assume a public sphere that is free to allow the uncensored pursuit of evidence, which is not to be taken for granted (Habermas, 1989).

Knowledge interests and methods

> Quantitative and qualitative methods are more than just differences between research strategies and data collection procedures. These approaches represent fundamentally different epistemological frameworks for conceptualizing the nature of knowing, social reality, and procedures for comprehending these phenomena. (Filstead, 1979: 45)

This assertion typifies the view that quantitative and qualitative orientations to social research represent profoundly different epistemological positions. They are, in this conception, mutually exclusive modes of social enquiry. But a further claim that is often made concerns the critical, radical or emancipatory significance entailed by the researcher's choice of method. Qualitative research is often seen as a way of 'empowering' or 'giving voice' to people, rather than treating them as objects whose behaviour is to be quantified and statistically modelled. This dichotomy is unhelpful, as we have already seen.

An alternative way of thinking about the objectives of social research and their relation to methodology is to consider the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas presented in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1987). Habermas identifies three 'knowledge interests' that must be understood in order to make sense of the practice of social science and its consequences in society. But he points out that it is not the intentional and conscious epistemological orientations of scientists that provide the key to this understanding. Instead, he conceives of knowledge interests as 'anthropologically deep-seated' traditions (Habermas, 1974: 8). The knowledge-constitutive interests to which Habermas refers are, in fact, the 'conditions which are necessary in order that subjects capable of speech and action may have experience which can lay a claim to objectivity' (1974: 9). In making this clear, we dispose of the idea that interests, in Habermas's sense, can be 'served' by any particular methodological approach; instead, they exist as necessary conditions for the possibility of research practice in the first place, independent of which particular methods are employed:

> That we disavow reflection *is* positivism. (1987: vii)

In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas wants to reconstruct the 'prehistory' of positivism to show how epistemology, as a critique of knowledge, has been progressively undermined. Since Kant, Habermas argues, 'one makes one's way over abandoned stages of reflection' (1987: vii). Since the ascendancy of positivism, philosophy can no longer comprehend science; for it is science itself that constitutes the only form of knowledge that positivism admits as critique. The Kantian enquiry into the conditions of possible knowledge has been replaced by a philosophy of science that 'restricts itself to the pseudo-normative regulation of established research' (1987: 4), such as Popper's falsificationism. Habermas attempts to rehabilitate an epistemological dimension within the philosophy of science, 'critical self-reflection', through which science can become capable of (non-scientistic) self-understanding. And in so doing, Habermas argues, science, and particularly social science, is able to reveal the conditions that might prohibit critical and emancipatory research practice.

We can now turn to the specific typology of interests that Habermas employs. Through an interpretation of Marx, Peirce, Gadamer and Dilthey, Habermas identifies three knowledge-constitutive interests that lie at the base of the 'empirical-analytic', the 'historical-hermeneutic' and the 'critical' sciences. The empirical-analytic sciences have as their basis an interest in technical control. The perpetual struggle for control over the natural world necessary for the reproduction of ourselves as human beings leads us to formulate rules that guide our purposive-rational action. In other words, the rational imperative for the acquisition of scientific knowledge has always been to gain control over the material conditions in which we find ourselves, and thereby to increase our physical and spiritual health and security. Because our interest in nature is primarily to control its conditions, 'this system of action binds, with transcendental necessity, our knowledge of nature to the interest in possible technical control over natural processes' (McCarthy, 1978: 62). The empirical-analytic sciences aim to produce nomological knowledge. Prediction and explanation, therefore, have a relationship of symmetry. Empirically supported universal laws are combined with a set of initial conditions, resulting in a set of (predictable) covariances of observable events. This is a model that can be recognized in much quantitative social research.

The historical-hermeneutic sciences, argues Habermas, arise through a practical interest in the establishment of consensus. For science (and, indeed, any other social practice) to take place, it is imperative that there is

reliable intersubjective understanding established in the practice of ordinary language. Hermeneutic understanding (*Verstehen*) aims to restore broken channels of communication. This takes place in two dimensions: the first is in the link between one's own life experience and the tradition to which one belongs; and the second is in the sphere of communication between different individuals, groups and traditions. The failure of communication is a perpetual and ubiquitous feature of the social world, and constitutes an obvious social problem. The concern to re-establish mutual understanding is also, therefore, a perpetual and ubiquitous one. The historical-hermeneutic sciences arose via a genealogy of practices in public affairs – in politics, and in the organization of communities and of labour for production – where individual life and social organization are impossible without some stability of intersubjective meaning. These, then, are the conditions that necessitate the development of the cultural or social sciences. Habermas contrasts the aim of the empirical-analytic sciences with the cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*):

> The first aims at replacing rules of behaviour that have failed in reality with tested technical rules, whereas the second aims at interpreting expressions of life that cannot be understood and that block the mutuality of behavioural expectations. (1987: 175)

The cultural scientist needs to learn to speak the language that he or she interprets, but must necessarily approach such interpretation from a specific historical point. And, in so doing, it is impossible to avoid taking into account the totality of interpretation that has already taken place: the researcher enters into what could be termed the 'hermeneutic circle'. The point towards which all this leads, for Habermas, is the establishment of consensus between actors. This consensus is necessarily fluid and dynamic, as it is reached through an interpretation that has evolved, and continues to evolve, historically. This consensual orientation for apprehending social reality constitutes the 'practical interest' of the hermeneutic sciences – whose (unstated) aim is to establish the common norms that render social activity possible.

At this point, one can clearly see how the quantitative/qualitative gap could be characterized as one that separates techniques of 'control' on the one hand and 'understanding' on the other. But this does not, in fact, confront the stronger claim often made for qualitative research that it is intrinsically a more critical and potentially emancipatory form of research. An important objective for the qualitative researcher is to be able to see 'through the eyes of those being studied' (Bryman, 1988: 61). This type of approach contends that it is necessary to understand the interpretations that social actors have of the world, because it is these that motivate the behaviour that creates the social world itself. While this is certainly true, it does not follow that the outcome is necessarily a critical piece of work. In fact, one can imagine a situation where such 'understanding' as is generated serves as a basis for the establishment of mechanisms for social control.

A successful critique is one that explains the phenomena under investigation more successfully than previously accepted theories. And in so doing, it must challenge assumptions that hitherto have been uncritically accepted. We run the risk, with the phenomenological, social constructionist or whatever particular qualitative approach, of replacing our own assumptions uncritically with those of our informants. In this way, via a sort of 'empiricism by proxy', qualitative research may repeat the errors more commonly thought of as being associated with unreflective positivism.

At this point Habermas is, again, helpful. The emancipatory interests of what Habermas (1987: 310) calls the 'critical' sciences do not exclude an empirical-analytic mode of enquiry: but equally they go much further than hermeneutic understanding. Habermas's thesis is that emancipatory interests provide the framework for going beyond nomological knowledge and *Verstehen*, and allow us to 'determine when theoretical statements grasp invariant regularities of social action as such and when they express ideologically frozen relations of dependence that can in principle be transformed' (1987: 310). It is through a self-reflective process that the critical sciences can come to identify constraining structures of power that, unreflectively, appear as 'natural', but are in fact the result of 'systematically distorted communication and thinly legitimized repression' (1987: 371).

Habermas sees the period of the Enlightenment as a golden age of 'critical' science, from astronomy to philosophy. But what distinguishes this period is not simply that it marked the beginning of 'the scientific method', but that the application of reason, as embodied in the method, was *inherently* emancipatory because of the challenge it posed to the legitimacy of the Church and of the existing social hierarchy. Habermas's claim is therefore that reason (what we commonly understand now as rationalism) itself inheres in an emancipatory knowledge interest, and that the application of reason is fundamentally a critical enterprise. One should not attempt to understand this position as a normative prescription to be taken up by 'radical' social scientists, though; rather, it is a way of conceptualizing how and why good science, of whatever variety, can be a liberating activity for humankind.

Zygmunt Bauman, writing alongside Habermas in the critical theory tradition, has a practical suggestion for the operationalization of a critical research approach – 'authentication':

> The emancipatory potential of knowledge is put to the test – and, indeed, may be actualised – only with the beginning of dialogue, when the objects of theoretical statements turn into active partners in the incipient process of authentication. (1976: 106)

The authentication of a critical theory, in this view, can only be achieved by the acceptance of its account by those who constitute its objects. For example, qualitative research that involves the feeding back of findings to the participants in the study may achieve just such a result. Of course, the limits of this approach are reached when the objects of research are those

occupying powerful or elite positions already – such as politicians, managers and professionals. In such cases, the informants might have vested interests to protect and might, accordingly, seek to misrepresent their real views on the critical interpretations made by researchers.

But criticism need not be exclusively the domain of the qualitative approach. Victorian studies of poverty, such as Rowntree's *Poverty: a Study of Town Life* (1902), achieved critical status, we would argue, by uncovering the extent of poverty on a quantitative scale:

> the labouring class receive upon the average about 25 per cent less food than has been proved by scientific experts to be necessary for the maintenance of physical efficiency. (1902: 303)
>
> That in this land of abounding wealth, during a time of perhaps unexampled prosperity, probably more than one-fourth of the population are living in poverty, is a fact which may well cause great searchings of heart. (1902: 304)

Rowntree's quantitative work consisted in simple descriptive statistics; but they conferred power on his ability to expose undiscovered conditions of poverty and deprivation. Numerical representations of data frequently achieve attention within media discourse; they are rhetorical devices. And this constitutes a way in which social theorizing, to quote Bauman's phrase, 'departs from the theorist's writing desk and sails into the open waters of popular reflection' (1976: 107).

It seems clear, then, that one also needs to consider the reception of research findings by their intended (or perhaps unintended) audience as part of the 'complete research situation'. The findings of focus group research on alcohol consumption, for example, have a varying significance depending on whether they are published in the popular press as part of a public health campaign aimed at helping alcoholics, or used to inform the marketing strategy of a major brewery. In this case, the reception of findings, by whom and for what purpose, is the crucial point. The recent controversy surrounding the US Census 2000 is an example where the statisticians, who were pushing for the use of a sophisticated multi-stage sampling methodology, wished to rectify the undercounting of ethnic minorities inherent in the constitutionally enshrined method of 'complete enumeration' (Wright, 1998). The political storm that followed is a case where widespread public reflection on important social issues has been precipitated by the perceived implications of a classical quantitative research methodology.

The implication, then, of Habermas's typology of knowledge interests is that we can consider the critical potential of different research methodologies, *sui generis*, to be unimportant in relation to the discussions presented in the following chapters. The willingness of researchers to challenge their own assumptions and subsequent interpretations according to the data, combined with the way in which the results are received and by whom, are greatly more significant factors for the possibility of emancipatory work than is the choice of technique employed.

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