QUALITATIVE INQUIRY BETWEEN SCIENTISTIC EVIDENTIALISM, ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM AND THE FREE MARKET

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A move towards empowering and emancipating qualitative inquiries is today endangered from several sides. Externally, there are the federal government demands for evidence-based practice, where experimental and quantified knowledge becomes the privileged form of scientific evidence, and there is the ethical bureaucracy of the Internal Review Boards. Internally, qualitative research may involve an ethical subjectivism, disregarding the manipulative potentials within qualitative research processes, as well as the application of qualitatively produced knowledge as evidence bases for management and marketing practices of an experimental economy.

I shall first point out the rather mythical notions of science involved in the quantitative dogma of social science and of federal evidence-based research, which promotes social science as bureaucratic social control. Second, I address the belief in a qualitative ethicism, where qualitative inquiry in itself is regarded as liberating and empowering, disregarding the softer seductive forms of market social control. Third, I conclude by asking why the powerful knowledge produced by qualitative inquiries is today being pushed out of federal social research, whereas management and marketing researchers in the free market remain free to produce whatever quantitative and qualitative evidence bases they deem relevant for controlling the minds and the behaviour of employees and consumers.

SCIENTISTIC EVIDENTIALISM AND BUREAUCRATIC CONTROL

The demand for evidence based practice in the social domain was inspired by the demands for scientifically controlled evidence for medical practice from the 1970s and onwards, and together with strict ethical controls leads to a “methodological conservatism” (Lincoln, 2005). Evidence based practice requires quasi-experimental designs, with subjects randomly assigned to experimental and control groups, and what counts as evidence is quantitative; in the current “evidence hierarchies” qualitative findings are close to bottom, barely above anec-

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2 The present discussion pertains mainly to the situation of qualitative research in the US and UK. With respect to the methodical and ethical reign of evidence based practice and Internal Review Boards, Denmark is in this respect still a rather backward country. Social scientists are generally regarded as rational and responsible scholars who may themselves judge whether quantitative or qualitative methods are best suited for the object and the objective of their investigations, and who are themselves capable of relating to the ethical issues which may arise in their research projects.
dotes and opinions. In the present context I shall address only one aspect of the evidence-based model of social research – the quantitative imperative for what counts as “evidence”.

**The social science dogma of quantification**

A demand for quantification of knowledge has long loomed within the social sciences, also before the current “evidence hierarchies”. I shall try to trace some of the complex web of origins of the quantitative dogma of the social sciences, where scientific knowledge becomes equal with quantitative knowledge.

**Modern social science quantification.** A demand for quantification of research material has dominated the social sciences, whereby qualitative approaches have been ruled out, or relegated to a lower scientific status. Thus according to a leading psychologist, “one’s knowledge of science begins when he can measure what he is speaking about, and express it with numbers” (Eysenck, 1973, p.7). In a widely used textbook on behavioral science the quantitative imperative is expressed as follows:

> “Scientists are not and cannot be concerned with the individual case. They seek laws, systematic relations, explanations of phenomena. And their results are always statistical.
> …the existential individual, the core of the individuality, forever escapes the scientist. He is chained to group data, statistical prediction, and probabilistic estimates” (Kerlinger, 1979, pp. 270, 272).

**Comte’s qualitative positivism.** Positivist philosophy is often given the responsibility for the quantitative rule in the social sciences. The founder of positivist philosophy - August Comte – believed, however, that social phenomena were too complex as subjects for mathematical analysis, and the application of mathematical analysis was not necessary for a positive science:

> ‘…our business is to study phenomena, in the characters and relations in which they present themselves to us, abstaining from introducing considerations of quantities, and mathematical laws, which is beyond our power to apply’ (Comte, 1975, p. 112; quoted from Michell, 2003, p. 13).

Later logical positivists, in particular the Vienna school, of the 1930s, formalized scientific research into a methodological bureaucracy, with quantification as a key criterion. Some logical positivists, such as Carnap, avoided equating science with quantification, and maintained that it is always difficult to say in advance where it will be useful to introduce numerical measurements leaving it up to workers in the field to decide whether quantification was useful to a particular domain (Michell, 2003).

**The social scientist’s natural science comedy of errors.** The quantitative imperative of the social sciences has been justified by pointing to the natural sciences as quantitative sciences. This is pure myth, the research practices of the natural sciences have long involved mixed
methods, where qualitative and quantitative analyses are useful tools; in some instances, such as Darwin’s theory of evolution, the major evidence is of a qualitative nature.

As empirical qualitative researchers we need not necessarily believe what some philosophers and social scientists have written about the methods of the natural sciences, but may ourselves ask, or interview, natural scientists on campus about their research practices. Or going to the university bookstore and asking for a book on qualitative analysis may just as well lead to the shelves for chemistry as to the social science shelves. Or more simply, writing “qualitative analysis” on the Google search machine and adding “physics” lead to about 9 million hits as compared to close to 10 million hits with “psychology” (the corresponding hits for “quantitative analysis” were about 21 million for physics and 14 million for psychology 5/1/2006). A more thorough study of texts on physics concluded that “the physics of the physicist” and “the physics of the psychologist” were two entirely different worlds (Brandt, 1973). An anthropologist who has actually entered, and observed research behaviour in, natural science laboratories, concludes laconically: “The imitation of the natural sciences by the social sciences has so far been a comedy of errors” (Latour, 2000, p.14).

The religious roots of quantification. We thus need to go beyond positivist philosophy and the natural sciences to find the origins of the quantitative dogma of social scientists. Michell has traced the quantitative imperative to the Bible, which tells us that God ‘ordered all things by measure, number and weight’ (Book of Wisdom 11:21) and to the Greek mystical religion of numbers by the Pythagoreans, who maintained that everything, which exists, exists in numbers. St. Augustine later connected the quantitative Pythagorean cosmology of Plato in Timaeus with the Bible, and concluded that ‘supreme measure, the supreme number, and the supreme order’ are attributes of God. St. Augustine’s dictum that the quantitative structure of the world reflects the Divine nature of the world came to dominate Medieval thought (Michell, 2003, p. 11). When Galileo a thousand years later advocated: ‘measure what is measurable and make measurable what is not’ this was not against the Catholic Church, but a radicalisation of St. Augustine’s Divine quantitative cosmology.

Quantitative funding. Tracing the origin of the quantitative dogma of science in Greek and Christian religion, does not explain the prevalence of the quantitative dogma among contemporary social scientists. Michell traces the hegemony of the quantitative imperative from the middle of the 20th century, which was advocated by the psychometric psychologists such as Stevens, to the economic structures supporting research in psychology. In a unified methodological position based upon quantification, the references to positivist philosophy mainly served as window-dressing, helping the funding of psychological research.

Quantification as bureaucracy and economic performativity. We may conclude that a restriction of scientific evidence to quantified knowledge has virtually nothing to do with the natural sciences, but is a religiously based dogma of modern social scientists, put forward with a missionary zeal – “Go out and make all mankind measurable!” The quantitative dogma is in line with a general rationalization and bureaucratization of society, today in particular in the federal domain. The quantitative dogma is also in line with as with the all pervasive economic
performativity of a postmodern capitalist economy, where everything that exists can be measured in money, or dismissed as worthless; in the words of (Lyotard, 1984) “be commensurable or disappear”!

**Scientific evidence, bureaucracy and neo-conservatism**

There is no scientific evidence for privileging or restricting science and evidence-based practice to quantified evidence. The quantitative imperative of linking science to quantification is not merely an internal scientific or philosophical problem, but also a socio-political and economical issue, and need be addressed as such. As researchers applying qualitative approaches we may attempt: 1) not to get drawn into wild goose chases of endless paradigmatic arguments about the essence of quantitative and qualitative methods in philosophical or scientific contexts, 2) to adopt the practical approach of natural scientists, and let subject matter and research purpose decide the application of qualitative and quantitative approaches in an investigation, and 3) to address the sociopolitical and economical contexts for the demands of quantification by federal funding agencies and evidence based practices.

Bureaucracy is characterized by regularity and stability, formal procedures and rules, written communication and quantification. In bureaucratic systems sociopolitical decisions are legitimized by application of formal procedures and scales. To take one example, within the educational system the value of students’ learning is evaluated on a grading scale, often with the quantified micromanagement of knowledge by multiple-choice tests. The reliable computer scoring of the tests leaves out personal judgment and renders the final scores an aura of objectivity. Decisions about certification and access to further educational privileges can be made on the basis of grade-point averages without personal judgment or nepotism interfering.

The enforcement of quantified evidence as the evidence, which counts by decisions in the federal administration system, lends the socio-political decisions an air of objectivity. Value differences and conflicting social interests may appear solvable by objective experimental and quantitative measures. Within public administration there is a “demise of professional judgement ” (Ryan & Hood, 2006), where qualified judgments by experts and practitioners lose relevance in relation to experimental quantitative evidence. These trends are enhanced in neoliberalist politics, with an emphasis on quantified outcomes, in the form of internal quantified controls, and of economic performativity as the key driving force of society. In sum, the issue of evidence-based practice is an issue of social administration, of different ways of exercising and legitimating social control.

**QUALITATIVE ETHICISM AND QUALITATIVE MANIPULATION**

In the ethical domain we encounter today a bureaucratization of social research corresponding to the bureaucratization of scientific methods by evidence practice. Internal Review Boards in the United States and United Kingdom pose strict formal ethical demands to social research. These requirements which are pertinent to high risk medical experiments and their formalized procedures, are less relevant to the low risk and more open qualitative inquiries (Lincoln, 2005). Different ethical issues pertain for the more personal and interactive collaborative qualitative research domain. The challenge for qualitative researchers today is, however, not
only to ward off the stifling ethical bureaucracies of the Internal Review Boards, but also to go beyond an internal qualitative ethicism, where qualitative research is regarded as good in itself, and also address the manipulative potentials of qualitative research.

**Qualitative ethicism**

Within qualitative research there exists a tendency to portray qualitative inquiry as inherently ethical, or at least more ethical than quantitative research. This can be called a qualitative ethicism (baptized and criticized by Hammersley, 1999). It is the leaning to see research almost exclusively in ethical terms with the belief that qualitative research uniquely embodies such ideals. A qualitative ethicism can distract researchers’ attention: on a micro-level away from the inevitable power plays inherent in qualitative research interactions and on a macro-level away from the socio-political context in which the research is carried out and the research findings applied (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005).

**Micro-ethnic and macro-ethics**

On a micro-level warm and caring empathic interviews researchers may, armed with good intentions and qualitative ethicism, face serious ethical problems if they commodify their feelings and engage in “faking friendship” in order to obtain knowledge (confer critiques by Mauthner et al., 2002). The researchers display of warmth and care is then not authentic, but serves as means, as an instrument for obtaining the knowledge the researcher needs for her or his research purposes. In one qualitative textbook the instrumentalizing of warmth and caring is advocated in the following way:

“…trust is the foundation for acquiring the fullest, most accurate disclosure a respondent is able to make …

In an effective interview, both researcher and respondent feel good, rewarded and satisfied by the process and the outcomes. The warm and caring researcher is on the way to achieving such effectiveness (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992:79, 87)

On a macro-level qualitative market research represents an extended and influential field of qualitative inquiry. Consumer interviews as individual motivational interviews or as focus groups may well follow standard ethical guidelines and also be enjoyable to grownup and children consumers. On a macro level, however, the consequences are more questionable. Focus group interviews about for example teenager attitudes to smoking may provide knowledge for improving advertisements to teenagers for smoking, or the knowledge produced may be used in health campaigns to prevent smoking. In a consumer society it is likely that there will be more funding available for producing and using knowledge on smoking attitudes for the tobacco industry’s advertisements to increase tobacco consumption than for public campaigns seeking to decrease tobacco consumption. While the ethical problems of vested interests and power contexts of qualitative market research are rather visible, also potential less obvious partisan interests and power contexts of apparently impartial academic interview research need be considered.

**Dialogical manipulation**
Research interviews are sometimes referred to as dialogue, a concept, which has also become popular in broader political and professional contexts. We may here discern four uses of the complex concept of dialogue: first, the truth seeking Socratic dialogue; second, the self-constituting I - Thou dialogue of Buber; third, professional dialogues emphasising warm, caring and egalitarian relations between the professional and the client, and fourth, dialogue as a management tool. In many settings the latter uses of dialogue has become an euphemism for manipulation.

In politics and management dialogues has come to serve as key instruments for controlling citizens by providing illusions of freedom, influence and egality, thus:

“The Peruvian military regimes of the 1970s regularly held what they called diálogos with peasants and workers, in which a military officer would deliver exhortations to an assembled group of peasants or workers, and the worker peasant-leaders would praise the political approach of the military government” (Tedlock & Mannheim, 1995:4).

“At the moment the political leader enters into a dialogue with the institutions and genuinely requests a given course, the institutions will be far more obliged to seek to carry out the superior political aims” (Danish Department of Finances, 1995: 32)

With the widespread use of dialogues today - creating impressions of freedom and mutuality in hierarchical power relationships between government and citizens, employer and employees, it becomes relevant to also address dialogically conceived relations between interviewer and interviewee with respect to exertion and masking of power. In contrast to the alienated social relations of researcher and subjects in experiments and surveys, dialogical research may suggest mutuality and egalitarianism; where qualitative interviewers with their gentle, unassuming non-directive approaches enter into authentic personal relationships with their subjects. The common term interview dialogue, which I used in an earlier textbook (1996), is a misnomer. It gives an illusion of mutual interests in a conversation, which in actuality takes place for the purpose of just the one part – the interviewer. In brief: The interviewer rules the interview, the interview is a one-way dialogue, the interview is an instrumental dialogue, the interview may be a manipulative dialogue, the interviewer retains a monopoly of interpretation; with alternatives as counter control and membership research (Kvale, 2006).

In sum, qualitative research is not a power-free zone, but opens for more subtle seductive forms of social control than the harsher and more resistance provoking bureaucratic control. Qualitative research is not in itself ethical, but raises a series of ethical problems – discussed here on a micro-level by the manipulative potentials of the interviewer-interviewee relationship and on a macro-level by the use of qualitative research for consumer manipulation. A conception of interviews as personal dialogues may provide liberal and humanistic interviewers with an illusion of equality and common interests with their subjects, while the interview researchers at the same time dominate the interview situation and retain sovereign control of the later use of the interview produced knowledge.
QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE BASES IN MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING

Control and power is everywhere, not only quantitative behavioural research involves exertion of power. Also qualitative experiential research involves an exertion of power, involving forms of power becoming important in an experiential economy. In federal institutions formal bureaucratic quantified controls prevail, whereas control in management and marketing allows for a broader range of quantitative and of more seductive qualitative forms of control.

In what may be the largest qualitative interview inquiry ever conducted more than 21,000 workers were each interviewed for over an hour and the interview transcripts analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. The interviews had been instigated by experiments on the effects of changes in illumination on production at the Hawthorne Chicago plant of Western Electrical Company in the 1920s. The experiments had led to unexpected results – work output and worker morale improved when the lighting of the production rooms was increased, as well as when it was decreased. (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939). The interviews brought forth the importance for production of the human relations between the management and the workers, and the empirical evidence they provided led to changed management practices. The older harsh industrial discipline of Taylor’s human engineering management was gradually replaced by the human relations school of management, with softer, less resistance provoking, manipulation through display of personal interest, understanding and empathy.

Today the most extensive application of qualitative research interviews probably takes place within consumer research, in particular in the form of focus groups on topics ranging from the promotion of cereals to the marketing of politicians. Thus in year 1990 more than 100,000 focus-group interviews were conducted in the United States (Vaugh et al., 1996). It has been estimated that qualitative market research – most commonly in the form of focus group interviews - accounts for about $2-3 billion a year of a worldwide market industry (Imms & Ereau, 2002). In order to secure maximum prediction and control of the consumer behaviour it is necessary to learn about their experiences, dreams, feelings and life styles. In an experiential economy, where efficient or inefficient marketing practices may involve profits or losses in hundreds of million dollars, both qualitative and quantitative evidence are necessary.

By the use of qualitative evidence as a base for management and marketing practices the quality of this evidence becomes paramount. In academic interview research a brief interview course, or perhaps an interview seminar over a semester, may often be considered sufficient training for interviewing to produce scientific knowledge for a dissertation. While superficial marketing interviewing also takes place, in serious management and marketing investigations the craftsmanship of the interviewer is paramount. Thus in the Hawthorne management studies two years of training were considered necessary for the interviewers, likewise in current focus groups two years’ training has been regarded as necessary for a qualified group moderator. In contrast hereto, academic interview research often appears as a field for happy amateurs.
In sum, it is within federal bureaucratic management with demands of simplicity, legitimacy, and rule-governed procedures that the confinement of evidence to formal quantified knowledge prevails. When it comes to management and marketing, major decisions in these complex and changing fields need to be based on quantitative as well as qualitative evidence.

CONCLUSION

Three conclusions from the above discussion of qualitative inquiry, ethics and the politics of evidence shall be put forth. First, as qualitative researchers we should not believe in the religious quantitative dogma prevailing in much social research and evidence-based practice. The issue of what counts as evidence in federal institutions is a socio-political question. We need to address directly the socio-political and economical interests of restricting empirical evidence to quantified knowledge, today predominantly in the dominance of bureaucratic control and legitimacy of social decisions and the all pervasive economical performativity of neoliberal politics. Second, as qualitative researchers we should not believe in a qualitative ethicism, that qualitative inquiries in themselves are good, caring and emancipating. We need to face the ethical dangers inherent in soft and often seductive forms of qualitative inquiries, and also address the human relations modes of management and the mass manipulation of consumers in an experiential economy, where qualitative evidence of the consumers experiences, dreams and desires plays a key role for marketing practices.

Third, qualitative evidence based practices exist abundantly today; they are at the core of management and marketing in an age of consumption. The rich multifaceted evidence from qualitative inquiries, which appears too complex for the formal simplicity of bureaucratic administration, is unavoidable for an efficient prediction and control of the manifold and changing consumer behaviour in an experiential economy. In federal institutions and projects the academic freedom of qualitative researchers to choose methods relevant to their subject matter and their research interest is today eroded by the formalistic and quantified requirements of evidence based practice and the bureaucratic confinements of Internal Review Boards. In contrast, in the free market researchers are free to choose methods appropriate for their subject matter and commercial interests.

REFERENCES


