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The Relevance of Qualitative Research

Recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in quantitative methods and an increasingly pluralist attitude toward different modes of enquiry. For instance, textbooks on mixed-methods research (Brannen 1992, Bryman 1988, Creswell 2003, Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003) have been published, many researchers have incorporated quantitative approaches of qualitative data (Alasuutari 1995, Clayman and Heritage 2002, Silverman 1985, 2000); and texts have appeared that go beyond the traditional qualitative-quantitative distinction (e.g. Ragin 1987, 2000). It is also commonly agreed that new generations of sociologists should get a better training of quantitative methods, partly because evidence-based, scientifically validated research has gained in momentum since the early 1990s in healthcare and social policy. For instance in Britain the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has expressed a concern for a lack of methodological pluralism despite the employer needs for quantitative research skills related to quasi-experimental methods and evidence-based policy (Payne et al. 2004: 154).

The demand for better training of quantitative methods made in the name of their societal relevance begs the question, what explains the rise of qualitative research during the past decades? If the need to revive the practice of quantitative research among sociologists stems from its usefulness for society, there must also be factors that help us understand why qualitative methods became increasingly popular within social research since the 1970s. Academic sociologists must have seen qualitative research somehow relevant for their attempts to study contemporary social phenomena, and therefore it is feasible to think that it resonates with some emergent features of advanced capitalist societies since the 1970s, when its forward march began. The question is particularly important since, despite the recent resurgence of interest in quantitative methods, qualitative research has a strong foothold, particularly in European countries (e.g. Payne et al. 2004, Platt 2006, Räsänen et al. 2005).

Unfortunately there is hardly any research that sets out to ask why qualitative research has gained in momentum since the 1970s. There are empirical studies that document changes in sociology's diversity of theoretical, methodological and substantive foci (Clark 1999, Payne et al. 2004, Platt 2006, Räsänen et al. 2005), but these authors often refrain from the sociology of knowledge perspective that would ask why the changes have taken place. On the other hand, there are historical accounts of the development of qualitative research, typically found in methods textbooks, but they view the development from within the paradigm in question, presenting the history

as a narrative of scientific progress that inevitably leads to the current state of the art. For instance, according to Denzin and Lincoln's (2000b) well-known narrative about its seven "moments", qualitative research has developed from a discipline inspired by an ethos of objective ethnography into reflexive practice that questions a simple representation of truth and seeks for new forms of expression as a form of literature closer to art than science.

The development of a discipline or research field certainly also follows its internal dynamics: scholars address and solve the problems and flaws of previous research and come up with new ideas and frameworks. Yet, the progress narrative of science is problematic, and particularly so in the social sciences. In natural science, "normal science" development can be described as gradual accumulation of knowledge, but in a long term historical perspective – as Thomas S. Kuhn (1970) has taught us – one can point out scientific revolutions that sweep away the foundations of a scientific paradigm, and the quest for knowledge is started anew. In the social sciences even the accumulative phases of "normal science" progress are scarce, and there is a multitude of more or less divergent schools of thought operative at any given time. The social sciences are more like a running commentary on the cultural turns and political events of different societies, communities, institutions and groups that changes over time. Social science research not only speaks to particular social conditions, it reflects the social conditions of a society and the theories that dominate at the time. Because there is no unidirectional progress in social and societal development, the theoretical and methodological apparatus available to social scientists change therefore as they too are shaped by historical, structural and cultural contexts. Therefore, in order to understand why a particular theoretical or methodological trend, such as qualitative research, becomes popular at a particular time, it is worthwhile to ask how it is related to simultaneous social changes and how it is relevant for the researchers' attempts to grasp those changes.

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So how is the rise of qualitative research related to changes in advanced capitalist societies? The timing and the way in which it happened give us some hints. Qualitative methods have gained popularity particularly during the past two or three decades. For instance in British sociology, as Carl May (2005: 522) points out, "after the political watershed of the early 1980s, much explicitly Marxist analysis disappeared, to be subsumed by social constructionism and postmodern theoretical positions that also privilege subjectivity and experience over objectification and measurement". He emphasizes that in different ways, subjectivity seems to have been one of the central concerns of British sociology since the 1980s, which according to him also explains the popularity of qualitative investigation. Indeed, a recent study shows that only about one in 20 of published papers in the mainstream British journals uses quantitative analysis (Payne et al. 2004).

More or less the same story can be told about Finnish sociology (Alasuutari 1999a).

An interest in cultural studies and constructionist research grew up out of a need to take distance from economic Marxism and structural sociology to take account of people's everyday life. By the early 1980s qualitative research had established a foothold, and by the early 1990s qualitative methods had become mainstream Finnish sociology (Alastalo 2005). Theory-wise, different strands of constructionist thought have gained popularity, and the development has meant an increased interest in questions of identity.

In the United States qualitative research developed particularly in response to "scientific" sociology and to research techniques that require a deductive model of hypothesis testing. The more inductive approach of qualitative research was seen not only as a better way to explain social phenomena by understanding the meaning of action. It was also seen as a way to "give voice" to the underdog, to help see the world from the viewpoint of the oppressed rather than the oppressor (Becker 1967, Becker and Horowitz 1972). Like European sociology, the rise of qualitative research has meant a trend from passive to active agency and to questions of subjectivity.

In terms of social changes in advanced capitalist societies, these two or three decades are marked by a forward march of neoliberal policies, or what could be called the market regime. The onset of the new regime can be dated back to Reaganism in the USA and Thatcherism in UK, whereas at the international level the publication of the McCracken report (1977) by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) meant that the organization abandoned Keynesianism and started to promote neoliberal policies. In the public sector this meant that the OECD became a key adversary of new public management (NMP), which refers to reforms that aim to make a shift from resource steering to market steering. The adoption of the new policy has meant that many public services have been outsourced and allocation of resources within the remaining public administration has been made dependent on the success of civil servants and their organizations in selling their services in real or quasi markets. Consequently, governance is less based on the authority of public administration to impose rules or restrictions on the actors at the lower level of power hierarchy. Instead, government works through the creation, shaping, and utilization of human beings as subjects. Thus power works through, and not against, subjectivity (Foucault 1982). Because the guidance of human beings is increasingly based on one's ability to foresee and manage individuals' acts of choice, there is demand for an expertise on subjectivity (Rose 1996: 151). Qualitative research and its interest in subjectivity and experience has been an adequate response to this development.

The link between neoliberal reforms and an increasing demand for qualitative research can be quite direct. For instance, when the deregulation of the Finnish electronic media system started during the first part of the 1980s, YLE, the national public broadcasting company quite fast launched a fairly big qualitative research program to study the audiences, their way of life and viewing preferences to fight for its share of the audience. There appears to be a similar link between media research and changes in media policy throughout the OECD countries: while the deregulation of public broadcasting, promoted and reviewed by the OECD (OECD 1993, 1999), was

started during the 1980s, reception studies and qualitative audience research gained in momentum from the 1970s onward.¹ For the most part, however, the increased interest in subjectivity and identity construction within academic (qualitative) research is only indirectly related to its policy relevance. It is only that recent policy changes in advanced capitalist societies have foregrounded questions of subjectivity in many ways.

The turning of the passive subject role of citizens into customers is not the only way in which recent policy changes have incited active choice and agency. Particularly from the 1990s onward, there has been a turn toward “inclusive liberalism”, by which David Craig and Doug Porter (2003, 2004) depict market liberalism with a more inclusive face. This Third Way (Blair 1998, Giddens 1998) social policy, also endorsed by the OECD (Mahon 2007, forthcoming), draws attention to “opportunity”, “empowerment” and “security”, and to social investments designed to promote them. The objective is to improve the effectiveness of welfare provisions by supporting and vitalizing civil society and by requiring that the objects of social policy become active agents and members of local communities. The emphasis on community stems from the importance accorded to ethics. In conceiving of individuals as agents, they are not considered maximisers of self-interest but, rather, individuals are now considered to be ethical creatures. According to Nikolas Rose, the problems that human societies are undergoing are increasingly often made intelligible as ethical problems, and individuals are bound into communities or subcultural groups by concepts such as responsibility, obligation, trust, honor, and duty (Rose 2000: 1398–1399). Rose emphasizes that this new politics of community can be articulated in a variety of forms. In the United States, communitarian thinkers aligned with neoconservatives and the religious Right in the idea that the revitalization of community values and civic engagement is the best way to fight crime and poverty (Rose 2000: 1403). The new communitarian or inclusive liberal regime entails a shift from the image of the melting pot to that of the rainbow in the sense that it stresses the existence and legitimacy of incommensurable – or at least distinct – domains of culture, values, and mores. However, at the same time the provision of social services is conditioned by the subjects’ commitment to the core values of honesty, self-reliance, and concern for others. Those who fail to comply are punished or excluded altogether. Thus, the compassionate talk about community is complemented by a strict policy line, which can be seen in slogans such as zero tolerance, “naming, blaming, and shaming,” and parental responsibility for the crimes of their children (Rose 2000: 1407).

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Arguing that qualitative research is relevant for neoliberal policies does not mean that researchers would necessarily be conscious of it, or see themselves as little helpers of neoliberalism. On the contrary, sociologists typically represent an opposition to un-

¹ For the development of qualitative audience research, see Alasuutari 1999b.

restrained capitalist development. That is in fact how their research is relevant: it addresses the problems related to current development. On the other hand, because qualitative researchers approach social reality from their particular, sometimes quite narrow perspective, they may end up in attitudes that are amazingly similar to the ideas that are central to the policy they oppose.

A recent trend toward a moral view among a postmodernist fraction of qualitative research is a prime example. Rejecting all references to empirical observations “remnants of the empiricist project” (Smith and Deemer 2000: 884), the proponents of this view suggest that qualitative inquiry be evaluated on moral and ethical grounds. As Norman Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (2000a: 873) put it, “good or bad inquiry in any given context is assessed in terms of (...) the criteria that flow from a feminist, communitarian moral ethic of empowerment, community, and moral solidarity”.

This emphasis on moral principles is remarkably similar to the views expressed in the inclusive liberalist policy discussed above. In both instances we find the emphasis that different cultures or communities have incommensurable or at least distinct values and mores, coupled with the stress laid on a moral community’s civic values that purport to be timeless and natural. Furthermore, in both cases the idea that social ills can be remedied by creating and revitalizing communities stems from communitarianism.

The way in which the moral fraction of qualitative researchers, in their attempt to be on the side of the underdog, end up on the same side, defending the same objectives as the dominant policy regime is a good example of the problems of critical social science. Because the perspective of the moral fraction stems from a hierarchical notion power as outer limits to freedom, it fails to realize that in capitalist societies power works precisely by inviting individuals and communities as subjects and by supporting their active engagement or “empowerment”.

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Since changes in social research methodology and theory, for instance the increased interest in questions of subjectivity and identity can be explained by the neoliberal turn in advanced capitalist societies, one could argue that social science is only a tool of governance. Thus, quantitative research about the population was particularly appropriate in the service of the more state-centered resource steering of the Keynesian era, whereas the governance through subjectivity characteristic of neoliberal policies creates more demand for qualitative research and constructionist theory. Such a bleak view of the function of social research is partly justified, but it is hardly the whole picture. Because social science is indeed more like running commentary on changing societies than accumulating knowledge about a steady object, it is understandable that scholars speak more or less the same language as their objects of study and that they address questions that are relevant within the frameworks guided by current forms of governance. That does not mean that social research is necessarily subservient to go-

vernment. There is variation as to how applied or policy relevant social research is, and invoking the prevalent discourses is also necessary when one takes critical distance from them.

Of course, as said, a critical analysis of a phenomenon such as a form of government may also be useful for the governors, not only for the governed. There is no way we can distinguish good and bad knowledge. Any knowledge that is worthwhile in adding our understanding about the human reality may be used for different purposes. For instance the idea that qualitative researchers should support people's empowerment by studying the underdog and their worlds of experience is no solution. On the contrary, neoliberalism has increased the need of the policy makers to understand the citizen-consumers' subjective worlds, and even historically, empirical social research has served government by studying the general public.

Finally, since power and knowledge are always intertwined in the sense that forms of government produce domains of knowledge and new knowledge may be turned into new practices of power, it is obvious that as researchers we are always partisans, and there is no such thing as objective truth. On that basis one might question whether there is any sense in trying to ground one's interpretations about the social world in empirical evidence. Could we quite as well base our interpretive work on moral principles?

Rejecting the whole idea of empirical evidence because we cannot reach objective truth would be the same as to conclude that because a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer². As was discussed at the beginning of this paper, the idea that all observation is theory laden stems from science studies that analyze the natural sciences. However, that has never stopped natural scientists from doing empirical observations and building and criticizing new theories on the basis of their observations and interpretations. The way reality is described in a theory or within a paradigm is no picture of reality out there, because the description and the ways in which the observations supporting the description are made are part of our practical relationship to the world. Yet that does not mean that any description is equally adequate, because the description and the practices based on it have to work in practice.

In other words, we know that no matter how meticulous we are in making empirical observations, they are always theory laden and reflect our position as researchers. Disciplined use of methods is the only way we can try to do Baron Munchausen's trick, who according to the story pulled himself out of the swamp by his own hair. Although both theories and methods are part of the same episteme as the practices we study do applying them, at best they are independent enough from each other that they can shed light on each other and challenge our prejudices. That is the best we can do. And besides, the observations and interpretations we make are only suggestions to the academic community and the general public.

² This comparison is based on a paraphrase of the economist Robert Solow, which Clifford Geertz 1973: 30 uses.