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Wolfgang Mayrhofer\*

## **Groping in the Dark? Recent Contributions to Progress in Interpretative Research – a Review\*\***

This paper reviews recent books supporting the development of using qualitative methods in interpretative research. Revolving around three major issues, i.e. increasing the level of rigour, using software packages and new methodological developments, the paper outlines the specific contributions of these books and lays out further needs for development.

Key words: **qualitative methods, interpretative research,  
mixed methods research, management research, book review**

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## 1. Introduction

Thinking in the Western world is characterised by a basic dichotomy: “There is an uneasiness that has spread throughout intellectual and cultural life. It affects almost every discipline and every aspect of our lives. This uneasiness is expressed by the opposition between objectivism and relativism, but there are a variety of other contrasts that indicate the same underlying anxiety: rationality versus irrationality, objectivism versus subjectivity, realism versus antirealism. Contemporary thinking has moved between these and other related extremes.” (Bernstein 1983: 1). Based on Cartesian dualism which sharply differentiates between the physical as external reality and thinking as internal world, this division is reflected in two basic paradigms of scientific thought and methods: the objective, deductive and often called quantitative and the subjective, interpretative and frequently labelled qualitative paradigm. This is not the place to give a rich description of these two paradigms (see, e.g., Lamnek 1988; Lueger 2000). However, the basic characteristics can be mentioned briefly.

From an objective, deductive perspective the focus is on the world as ‘given’ entity that can be looked at and analysed without referring to subjective interpretation. Archetypically, this approach is reflected in the approach of natural science which strives for universal laws and testing of hypotheses via quantitative, experimental methods. Critical rationalism presupposes an objective reality, i.e. truth. Through a collective effort called science this truth can be approached more and more. Critique becomes crucial in this approach as it is essential for the core elements like intersubjectively checking results and methods (Popper 1972; Scholtz 1991). The methods used in this paradigm have to meet criteria such as connection with theory, objective research process, operational definition and isolation of relevant measures, rational explanation, primacy of falsification (Friedrichs 1973).

From a subjective, interpretative point of view the world is not simply given as an objective reality. Rather, it is subjectively constituted and socially pre-interpreted, formed by the observation schemes of the individual actors. In this process, objective and subjective meaning can be differentiated. Subjectively, the actors themselves attribute meaning towards their own actions. Nevertheless, action can be linked with meaning without referring to the psyche of the actor through the observation of observers (Soeffner 1989; Schütz 1981). Given this background, the methods used within this paradigm usually have to meet specific criteria like openness, communicativity, contextuality or search for meaning (e.g., Lamnek 1988).

Both approaches are firmly established in scientific research, although in quite different disciplines. For example, whereas the objective approach dominates natural sciences, the subjective perspective is the dominant paradigm in anthropology which also has some relevance for management and economic research. Linked with the dichotomy between the subjective and objective paradigm and the foothold that the former has gained in management research, a number of issues have emerged. They centre on two major elements: The acceptance in the scientific community and, inextricably linked with this, the level of quality of research.

This paper deals with both issues but, in essence being an enriched book review, focuses on the latter by presenting a number of recent and classic works enhancing

the scholarliness of interpretative research. After addressing the issue of acceptance in the scientific community in brief, it will highlight three major concerns often raised by critics of using qualitative methods in management research. Based on this, the main section presents a number of recent publications linked to these concerns. Final remarks on potential next steps in the development of using qualitative research methods in management research conclude this paper. Ultimately, this paper is also a personal account drawing on observations made during a 25-year journey of looking at developments in qualitative research. For nearly all of this period, the author was actively using some of these methods while at the same time also capitalizing on the more traditional 'hard' statistical methods from the objective paradigm and, therefore, guilty of pragmatic oscillation between seemingly irreconcilable approaches towards making scientific sense of reality.

## 2. Acceptance in the scientific community

The objective perspective<sup>1</sup> still is the primary approach for much of management, let alone economic research.<sup>2</sup> Yet, an interpretative perspective has gained a firm foothold in management research over the past three decades. In the 1970ies, qualitative research in management was regarded as exotic and sometimes even suspicious. Arguably, since then three developments contributed to an increasing global acceptance of an interpretative view in management research. First, there was a growing doubt about the ability of the classical quantitative approach to sufficiently shed light on, for example, phenomena such as individual meaning and subtle differences in behaviour due to obvious limitations of mere 'number crunching'. Second, constructivism (e.g. Glasersfeld 1997) was on the rise. Distrusting an objective view of the world assuming the possibility of observing the world as it 'really' is, constructivist thinking emphasises the individual and social construction of reality, denying ontological reality independent of the observer. Constructivism is squarely opposed to a positivist view of the world and related methods. Conversely, an interpretative perspective and qualitative methods fit well with such a view of the world. Third, topics emerged in management research that tended to favour an approach differing from the objective paradigm. The discussion about organisational culture (e.g. Schein 1985) is a typical example. Although quantitative studies do contribute to a better understanding of organisational culture and its effects, an interpretative approach clearly adds value.

Looking at the current situation, interpretative research has an established place in management research. Established top-tier journals regularly include qualitative research papers and young researchers following this route are not automatically eyed

<sup>1</sup> In the remainder of this paper, I use the terms objective, deductive, positivist, quantitative etc. and its interpretative counterparts interchangeably to denote the respective paradigms of research and methods usually linked with them. In doing so I take up a widespread, yet somewhat blurred terminology for the sake of convenience. Strictly speaking, quantitative and qualitative methods can be used in both paradigms.

<sup>2</sup> Management research here is the umbrella term for research targeted at different aspects of management, in particular behavioural science, business administration and management science, in the tradition of Staehle (1999).

suspiciously. Yet, it is still a minority position and considerably caution exists regarding its basic epistemological position and the methods it uses. Some of this caution is rooted in widespread misunderstandings. Against this backdrop, it makes sense to take a closer look at recent books aiming at fostering the position of interpretative research in the management research community by clarifying these misunderstandings.

### **3. Popular misunderstandings about qualitative methods in interpretative research**

Three major issues are often raised by critics of interpretative research in management.

#### *There is a lack of methodological rigour*

Although a look into the history of interpretative research shows that even in the early days there was a quite clear understanding of how to collect and analyse qualitative data, the stereotype of a low level of methodological rigor persists. Qualitative researchers are not entirely blameless in this matter. Imagine the fictitious, but realistic example of a conference session. First a paper is presented that uses hierarchical linear modelling based on a representative national sample of secondary school pupils to determine to what degree their perception of teaching effectiveness is influenced by the individual teaching style, by the classroom and their class mates, by the school building and organisation of the school and by national regulations concerning school matters. If presented *lege artis*, the paper will be utterly clear about sampling, variables and their operationalisation as well as statistical outcomes and respective indicators such as Aikake information criterion (AIC) or intercorrelation coefficient (ICC) which provide the basis for the conclusions drawn from this paper. Subsequently, a paper researching the same issue presents results gained from narrative interviews with 12 pupils. Based on content analysis, the conclusions are supported by brief 2-3 lines of original quotes which, as the presenter more or less plausibly claims, are the result of intensive analytical work and debate. It would be hardly surprising to find many in the audience wondering what the second presenter actually did and how the conclusions were reached. Of course, this is not inherent in the method, much less the interpretative approach itself. Of course, clear methodological and method related standards exist when using qualitative methods, ranging from ideas about sampling procedures, e.g. theoretical or dimensional sampling, via elaborate prescriptions about how to document interviews or observations to detailed step-by-step procedures when analysing the material including inter-rater reliability issues. Still, this is often not adequately taken into account, primarily because for some time researchers could get away with it and the respective body of knowledge was not widely available.

Times have changed. Qualitative research is under close scrutiny, the level of expectations has risen and the existing knowledge base has greatly broadened. As section 4 will exemplify, the body of knowledge is not only there, but also easily accessible.

*There are no adequate software tools supporting qualitative research, therefore handling large data sets is difficult*

Using technological support by relying on various kinds of computing machinery ranging from simple mechanical support via mainframes with punch cards and personal computers with their statistical packages up to super-computers with their multi-threaded processors has a long tradition in statistical analysis. Handling large amounts of data without these utilities is virtually impossible nowadays. For quite some time, qualitative methods were not able to – and often did not need to – parallel this. Paper, marker and scissors dominated the scene. At later stages, creative ways of using word processing or spread sheet applications were often sufficient to handle the data. In addition, initial releases of software for qualitative analysis were not only expensive, but also clumsy and provided only limited advantage over doing one's analysis literally by hand.

Again, times have changed. The amount of data used in qualitative research projects seem to increase evermore. In-depth interviews with 50 individuals in one dissertation are not uncommon. Transcription of these interviews results in a substantial amount of text. Assuming on average a one hour interview with about 9,000 words per interview and roughly about 25 pages text, this means about 1,200 pages text. In NVivo, a widely used software for qualitative analysis, this leads to a 100 MB file. An intensive analysis of that much data without the help of intelligent, easy to handle software is enormously difficult. As section 4 will show, such software nowadays thankfully exists as does some guidance which software to choose on what grounds.

*There are very little if any new methodological developments*

At a first glance, the rate of development in the qualitative world seems to be slow. At the level of methods, there is an existing canon of qualitative methods both when collecting and analysing data that researchers can refer to. Improvements, so it seems, is only made in small steps within the given boundaries and frameworks. At the methodological level, the basic positions, usually in contrast to the quantitative paradigm, are clearly stated and the war of paradigms (e.g. Teddlie/Tashakkorie 2003) seems to have come to a standstill with combatants on both sides hardly convinced by opposing arguments and unwilling to change their own positions.

Time progresses and with it new approaches emerge. Their common denominator is the discontentment of some researchers with the seemingly insurmountable divide between the two world views on research. As section 4 will demonstrate, promising new developments at both the method-related and the methodological level make an effort to spark a new discussion and overcome the dichotomous divide between objective and subjective approaches towards research.

#### **4. Recent publications for a better use of qualitative methods in research in HRM**

Following the popular misunderstandings outlined in the previous section, the books presented here are organised in three blocks.

#### 4.1 *Comprehensive works aiming at more rigor*

A first set of books addresses the issue of increasing the overall level of quality in interpretative research, thus promoting in particular efforts that enhance the rigor of qualitative research. In different ways, these books offer a comprehensive view.

Michael D. Myers' book on *Qualitative Research in Business & Management* (2009)<sup>3</sup> is an effort to give an overview about different aspects of the qualitative research process. The book addresses three major issues.

- After introducing the book and elaborating on his view of qualitative research (Part I), the first issue dealt with are fundamental concepts of research (Part II). This includes views about how to design one's research as well as the philosophical and ethical aspects of doing research.
- The second issue, constituting the core part of the book, focuses on qualitative research methods (Part III) and on collecting qualitative data (Part IV) as well as analyzing it (Part V). Myers differentiates between four different types of methods: action, case study and ethnographic research as well as grounded theory. Based on this, he discusses interviews, participant observation and fieldwork, and using documents as the three major data collection techniques. In terms of data analysis, Myers in a first step gives a short overview about major ways of analyzing qualitative data ranging from simple coding by assigning word counts to metaphorical analysis. Subsequently, he discusses three data analysis approaches in more detail: hermeneutics, semiotics and narrative analysis.
- The third issue covers writing up results and publishing them. Very briefly, Myers gives some practical advice on how to write up what one has found and how to get this published (Part VI). Concluding the book, a final chapter (Part VII) puts qualitative research in perspective by emphasising the equal worth that qualitative work has compared to the more widespread quantitative approach.

Myers' book is especially valuable for readers trying to get an overview about how to approach interpretative research and how to defend such an approach. Besides some questionable labelling, e.g. the difference between methods and techniques, this book is very readable, down-to-earth in a positive sense and allows readers to quickly orientate themselves in the world of interpretative research. Many practical examples help readers to link the arguments in the book with their practical problems. This book's target group is the qualitative research novice especially in business and management research looking for some early orientation regarding the decision about whether to use an interpretative approach or not and about the appropriate method.

Aglaja Przyborski and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr have written a book that intends to accompany the whole process of qualitative research from initial considerations in the early stages of research way down to writing up results. It gives practical support as well as promotes reflected decisions at crucial cross-roads. *Qualitative Forschung. Ein*

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<sup>3</sup> Myers, M. D. (2009): *Qualitative Research in Business & Management*. London et al.: Sage, 284 pages, 978-1-4129-2166-4 (paperback, approx. 30 Euro).

*Arbeitsbuch* (2009)<sup>4</sup> takes a typical research process as point of departure and as its major structuring criterion. The story of their book follows three major steps.

- In a first step, they set the foundations by addressing the starting point of each research – one’s research interest, the methodological position taken, the chosen research area and the methods used (chap. 1) – as well as dealing with the methodology and standards of qualitative empirical research in general (chap. 2).
- In the second step, the authors address data collection, sampling and data analysis. Regarding data analysis, they focus on observation and interviews and how to gain access to adequate material as well as how to document the material. A complete section deals with various techniques of documenting interviews, but also film sequences (chapter 3). Tightly linked with data collection, sampling is a crucial issue. Here the authors focus on different ways of sampling in qualitative research, especially theoretical sampling, sampling according to pre-determined criteria and snowballing (chap. 4). Subsequently, the authors present four major ways of data analysis: grounded theory, narrative analysis, objective hermeneutics, and documentary method. For each of them, they not only give a brief overview about the historical development and instruments linked with these approaches, but also highlight the theoretical background as well as theoretical basic principles and show in a step-by-step procedure, using practical examples from real-life research, how to apply these approaches to one’s research (chap. 5). The next chapter deals with the issue of generalisation. Building on the general problem of how to generalise scientific results, the authors make a case for using ‘type’ as the crucial point of reference when dealing with the issue of generalisation in a qualitative setting. At considerable length and depth, the authors discuss basics of generalisation and then, using a practical example, illustrate how this problem can be dealt with in qualitative research (chap. 6).
- In the final third step, the authors address the problem of how to present the results of qualitative analysis, in particular to the scientific community (chap. 7).

This book, again designed as a comprehensive and introductory volume, has some clear selling points. First, it is strictly orientated towards a typical research process which leads to a comprehensible overall structure. Second, by extensively using concrete examples from real-life research, the text – although by itself not so easily accessible because of the authors’ writing style – helps readers to make the transfer from the conceptual to the practical level. Third, by addressing the issue of generalisation and how to deal with it in the interpretative paradigm, the authors make an important contribution by helping researchers in this corner of the scientific world to build a case for the use of this approach. The target audience of this book is the more advanced researcher interested in quite in-depth guidance about typical issues arising in qualitative research who is not afraid of more abstract language.

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<sup>4</sup> Przyborski, A./Wohlrab-Sahr, M. (2008): *Qualitative Sozialforschung: Ein Arbeitsbuch*. (2 ed.), München: Oldenbourg, 403 pages, ISBN 978-3-486-58509-4 (paperback, 34.80 Euro).



#### 4.2 Software tools

In the quantitative world, more or less sophisticated software packages such as SAS, SPSS or R have been existent and widely used for a long time. For example, the origins of SPSS can be traced back to the late 1960ies when three Stanford graduates finished their first version of the ‘Statistical Package for the Social Sciences’ which was later linked with the University of Chicago due to a career move of the main protagonists of SPSS and was available as a PC version in 1984 (see [www.spss.com/corpinfo/history.htm](http://www.spss.com/corpinfo/history.htm)). By contrast, the wide-spread use of software in qualitative research is a much more recent phenomenon. For example, NUD\*IST, the ‘Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing’ package which was the predecessor of today’s popular NVivo software, was introduced in 1981 and only in the 1990ies a more widespread use of such packages among researchers can be detected.

*Using Software in Qualitative Research* (2007), Ann Lewins’ and Christina Silver’s introductory book<sup>5</sup> on the practice and principles of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS), aims at helping readers to choose the most appropriate software package for their research and, once the decision has been made, getting the most out of it. The structure of the book follows this basic idea and proceeds in four steps.

- The first step is devoted to various preparatory tasks related to using the software and the data. At the beginning, the authors give an overview about key similarities between all types of CAQDAS packages and develop criteria for choosing the appropriate software for one’s project (chap. 1). Preparing the data generated within the project to be used with a CAQDAS package or a specific software (chap. 2) and a description of the practical tasks linked with such software (chap. 3) provide the basis for the rest of the book. In terms of practical examples and exercises, the authors choose three well-known CAQDAS packages – ATLAS.ti5, MAXqda2 and NVivo7 – as points of reference and guide the reader through some of the specifics of using the respective package.
- Step two consists of various forms of early exploration and coding. After focusing on text-level work of data exploration (chap. 4), three consecutive chapters deal with coding issues in more detail. To begin with, the authors outline basic principles and processes of qualitative coding and different approaches, in particular inductive and deductive coding (chap. 5). Then they discuss various aspects of coding schemes and coding frames such as the use of hierarchies in coding and factors influencing the chosen approach to the development of a coding scheme, including six real-life project examples for coding scheme structures in CAQDAS packages (chap. 6). Based on these considerations, the authors proceed to software specific variations in coding linked to the respective generic tasks, i.e. generating codes, applying them to a text, defining and listing

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<sup>5</sup> Lewins, A./Silver, C. (2007): *Using Software in Qualitative Research: A Step-by-Step Guide*. Los Angeles: Sage, 283 pages, ISBN 978-0-7619-4923-7 (paperback, approx. 40 Euro).

codes, how to proceed when changes in how to code data occur during the research process and the subsequent reorganization of the coding schema (chap. 7).

- Step three encompasses different aspects of data analysis. This starts with the basic retrieval of coded data (chap. 8) and continues with managing processes and interpretations – by writing with a special emphasis on memo writing – and the role of memos in qualitative analysis (chap. 9). It continues with further making sense of the data by mapping ideas and linking concepts. Based on adaptive theory and grounded theory, the authors explain different mapping tools and the software specific variations of mapping activities (chap. 10). Organizing the data to known characteristics (chap. 11) and different ways to interrogate the data set (chap. 12) together with a brief note on how to choose the software also in the light of your personal preferences (chap. 13) conclude the text part of the book.
- Step four of the book contains four appendices which in this case are integral to the whole book. They not only give some additional information on the background and summary of the example projects used as illustrations in the book (appendix A) and some important keyboard shortcuts for the three major CAQDAS packages used throughout the book (appendix B). The appendices also give short overviews about seven CAQDAS packages and their main features and functions. In addition to the three packages used in the book, they present HyperRESEARCH 2.6, QDA Miner 2.0, Qualrus and Transana 2 (appendix C). Some resources and links finish the book (appendix D).

Lewins' and Silver's book is helpful on a number of accounts. Using CAQDAS packages is more or less a *conditio sine qua non* when doing serious qualitative research and trying to get published in top-tier journals. Hence, a book outlining major issues linked with these packages in general and providing help for choosing among them is per se helpful. In addition, it is well written with considerable resemblance to good US-American textbooks in terms of layout, although some readers might feel that less graphic and more text would have helped in some sections. Finally, the book provides the reader *en passant* with a lot of information about interpretative research and the problems and solutions available. Far from being merely technical, the book is also qualified as a means to deepen some aspects of interpretative research. However, it is clearly no substitute for an in-depth exploration of the specific CAQDAS packages' respective handbooks. The target group for this book are versed researchers who have some basic knowledge in interpretative research and want to use adequate software for enhancing their analytical depth and quality.

### **4.3 Recent methodological developments**

At the level of methods, an established canon of methods concerning data collection and data analysis exists in the qualitative world. In terms of data collection, there is little difference to the well-known methods of empirical social science research (see e.g. Titscher/Meyer/Mayrhofer 2008 ). Interviews, observation and document/text analysis constitute the backbone, enriched by partly detailed instructions of how to record the data. While there is no common agreement about their exact number and clustering, content analysis, objective hermeneutics, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, grounded theory or conversation analysis undoubtedly belong to the core

approaches. At a more fundamental level, though, there is still a clear division between 'quantities and qualities'. Yet, the paradigm war fought during the past decades has not only produced staunch followers on both sides and mutual defamation, but also some efforts to bridge the abyss between the two worlds.

Basically arguing at the level of methods, qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) is a data analytical method that tries to find a 'third way' between standardised statistical approaches and the case study method. Linked with the work of Ragin (e.g. Ragin/ Rihoux 2008), it aims at identifying causal relationships and analyses the effects of a specific variable or the variables behind a specific effect. The method unfolds its greatest strengths when dealing with a small to medium number of cases, approximately 5 to 50 cases, thus combining analytical depth of the classical interpretative approach as well as the breadth of quantitative studies. QCA is not based on familiar linear, but on Boolean algebra, the algebra of logic and sets. It treats social scientific categories as sets and looks at cases in terms of their multiple memberships. QCA wants to provide analytical tools for a holistic comparison of cases, understood as configurations of variables, and looks at their similarities and differences. This makes it different from case-oriented as well as variable oriented research. "With QCA it is possible to view cases as configurations, examine causal complexity (defined as patterns of multiple conjunctural causation - where no single cause may be either necessary or sufficient), and identify types of cases based on the different patterns of causal conditions they exhibit. Thus, social scientists can free themselves from some of the restrictive, homogenizing assumptions of variable-oriented social science without giving up the possibility of formulating statements about broad, cross-case patterns." (Kogut & Ragin 2006: 47).

The book by Carsten Q. Schneider and Claudius Wagemann on *Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) und Fuzzy Sets. Ein Lehrbuch für Anwender und jene, die es werden wollen.* (2007)<sup>6</sup> provides a concise German language introduction into this method. It has a simple three-step rhythm.

- In a first step, the foundations of the method are explained. After an insightful foreword by Charles C. Ragin describing the history of QCA, the core characteristics of this method are described by presenting it as middle ground between case study and statistical analysis (chap. 1) and the statistical foundations, in particular basics of Boolean algebra and truth tables.
- Based on this, the second step comprises of two concrete variants of QCA. In the most basic form, crisp-set QCA which transforms all variables into dichotomous ones is presented by outlining various opportunities for applying csQCA as well as problems linked with this approach, e.g. limited empirical variety, contradictory lines in the truth tables or the non-appearance of outcomes. Some examples of csQCA analyses applied in past projects conclude this section

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<sup>6</sup> Schneider, C. Q./Wagemann, C. (2007): *Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) und Fuzzy Sets. Ein Lehrbuch für Anwender und jene, die es werden wollen.* Opladen, Farmington Hills: Barbara Budrich, 287 pages, ISBN 978-3-86649-068-0 (paperback, 24.90 Euro).

(chap. 2). Based on csQCA and its limitations, the authors then present fuzzy-set QCA. They again start with a foundations section, elaboration on the basic concepts of fuzzy sets such as fuzzy scales, equivalent Boolean operators in fsQCA or necessary and sufficient conditions in fuzzy sets (chap. 3). They then go on and demonstrate, using concrete examples from research, the practical applicability of fsQCA and potential enhancement of this method.

- In a brief third step, the authors conclude the book by discussing the future of QCA as a way of systematically comparing various units of analysis, outlining areas of future development work such as the determination of membership values or taking into account various forms of path dependency in the analysis and interpretation.

This book on QCA is explicitly targeted at researchers already using QCA as well as beginners. By no means is this a book with an emphasis on justifying and defending this approach. Although the authors do this where appropriate, it is more a classical German-language textbook assuming that the phenomenon dealt with is beyond dispute. Rather, the authors guide the reader who wants to use this method through the foundations and then explain in sufficient detail the two variants that seem to be most helpful for many researchers. The authors' zeal for this method is clearly detectable. Nevertheless, the basic tone of the book is sober. They make it easy for readers to get into the construct of ideas of QCA and raise, at least for newcomers, substantial interest in this method and its contributions to social science research.

Going far beyond the level of methods and clearly addressing more fundamental issues in the separation between the objective and subjective paradigm in social science research, the debate on mixed methods research has gained momentum over the past decade. The trench warfare between the two purist ways of scientifically exploring the world – the objective-positivist paradigm and the subjective-interpretative paradigm – has at least one common denominator representatives from both camps share: “While they disagree on which paradigm is more accurate, the one belief purists from both paradigms hold in common is that the two paradigms embody such fundamentally different understandings of the world and what constitutes legitimate truth or knowledge claims that they should not be mixed within a single study.” (Rocco et al. 2003: 21)

This has not remained unchallenged. Arguably starting with the efforts of Denzin in the 1970ies to introduce different kinds of triangulation which can be related to data, investigators, theory, and within and between method triangulation into social science research (e.g. Denzin 1970 as cited in Downward/Mearman 2007: 80 f.), the issue of mixing different basic approaches as well as different methods has emerged.<sup>7</sup> From a pragmatic point of view, the methodological position as well as the selected methods should strictly adhere to the requirements of the research issue at hand: whatever works best should be chosen, irrespective of its paradigmatic roots. Taking a dialectic perspective, advocates of this position argue that using elements of both

<sup>7</sup> As an expression of the growing importance of this strand of thinking across the two paradigms, a new journal – *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* published by Sage – has seen its first issue in 2007.

paradigms is not only permissible, but essential to gain a fuller understanding of the human and social phenomena tackled (Rocco et al. 2003: 21). Two books by Creswell and Plano Clark – *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (2007)<sup>8</sup> and *The Mixed Methods Reader* (2008)<sup>9</sup> – provide an overview about both how to do mixed method research in practice and about classical texts important for the development of this view.

In the monograph on how to design and conduct research, Creswell and Plano Clark follow the broad logic of how to design a study when doing mixed methods research. The book has four distinct parts.

- The first part outlines not only the purpose of the book and clarifies the audience, but gives a brief overview about what mixed methods research is by developing some of the core concepts and summing up the history of its development (chap. 1). This is followed by a more basic chapter on the relationship between the qualitative and quantitative paradigm and the research problems addressed by mixed methods research (chap. 2). Subsequently, the next chapter contains four examples of mixed methods research studies that exemplify typical issues linked with this type of research (chap. 3).
- The second part deals with initial decisions when planning for a mixed method research study. To begin with, potential researchers have to commit themselves to a specific mixed methods design. They can choose between four typical design variants: triangulation, embedded, explanatory and exploratory (chap. 4), all of which are in greater detail dealt with also in four appendices. This is followed by typical steps not only relevant for mixed methods research: choice of title, stating the problem, formulating a purpose statement as well as research questions and hypotheses (chap. 5).
- The third part deals with issues related to actually conducting the study and disseminating its results. This includes collecting (chap. 6) and analyzing data (chap. 7) as well as writing mixed methods research (chap. 8).
- The fourth part starts with typical questions often raised in connection with mixed methods research. These questions not only revolve around the issue of what mixed methods research actually is, but also around the acceptance of this approach in the scientific community, including fellow faculty members, funding agencies and journals (chap. 9). Future directions for mixed methods research close this book (chap. 10).

For the edited volume, Plano Clark and Creswell carefully have collected a selection of published texts that contribute to a better understand of the methodological dimensions of this approach and illustrate its effect on practical research.

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<sup>8</sup> Creswell, J. W./Plano Clark, V. L. (2007): *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA et al.: Sage, 296 pages, ISBN 1-141292792-7 (paperback, approx. 31 Euro).

<sup>9</sup> Plano Clark, V. L./Creswell, J. W. (Eds.) (2008): *The Mixed Methods Reader*. Thousand Oaks, CA et al.: Sage, 617 pages, ISBN 1-141295145-6 (paperback, approx. 30 Euro).

- In the methodological part of the book comprising of fourteen chapters, this includes, for example, contributions about the evolution of mixed methods research, triangulation as seen in from a mixed methods angle or the role of validity in this type of research.
- The second part about exemplar research assembles nine studies using mixed methods research on a great variety of topics ranging from research into career development, health care and stress, school and adult education to child care.

Both books seem especially valuable for readers interested in an alternative to the either/or approach often put forward by methodological purists and in some guidance on how to use this approach in one's own research as well as how to make a strong case for such a choice. While the edited volume provides some in-depth insight into both the basic conceptual foundations and practical applications by showing some 'model-cases', the monograph in a more textbook-like manner takes the neophyte on a journey of designing a mixed methods research study. Together they constitute a powerful and somewhat comprehensive package for researchers interested in this approach and who want to check whether it is compatible with their own assumptions and adequate for their respective research problems.

#### **4.4 Some classics**

Books on qualitative research in general and specific qualitative methods in particular have been on the market for a number of years. The following works – an entirely subjective selection against the backdrop of this author's experience in research and tutoring students and young researchers using more accessible qualitative methods – have proved to be helpful for individuals thinking about using interpretative research and qualitative methods.

##### *Introductions and general overviews<sup>10</sup>*

- Flick, U. (2006): *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. (3 ed.), London et al.: Sage.
- Lamnek, S. (2005): *Qualitative Sozialforschung*. Weinheim et al.: Beltz.
- Mayring, P. (2002): *Einführung in die qualitative Sozialforschung*. Weinheim et al.: Beltz.
- Miles, M. B./Huberman, A. M. (1994): *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*. (2 ed.), London et al.: Sage.
- Silverman, D. (Ed.) (2004): *Qualitative research*. (2 ed.), London et al.: Sage.
- Strauss, A. L. (2007): *Grundlagen qualitativer Sozialforschung. Datenanalyse und Theoriebildung in der empirischen soziologischen Forschung*. (2 ed.), Stuttgart: UTB W. Fink.

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<sup>10</sup> Here and following: alphabetical order.

### *Overview about various methods*

- Denzin, N. K./Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.) (2000): Handbook of Qualitative Research. Thousand Oaks et al.: Sage.
- Flick, U. (Ed.) (2009): The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit (8 volumes). London et al.: Sage.
- Seale, C./Gobo, G./Gubrium, J. F./Silverman, D. (Eds.) (2004): Qualitative Research Practice. London et al.: Sage.

### *Focus on specific methods*

- Mayring, P. (2007) Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken. (9 ed.), Weinheim et al.: Beltz.
- Strauss, A./Corbin, J. (1998): Basics of Qualitative Research. Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory. London et al.: Sage.
- Titscher, S./Meyer, M./Wodak, R./Vetter, E. (2000): Methods of Text and Discourse Analysis. London et al.: Sage.
- Wodak, R./Meyer, M. (2001): Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis. London et al.: Sage.
- Yin, R. K. (2009): Case Study Research. Design and Methods. (4 ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## **5. Current state of affairs and future steps**

When looking at the past quarter of a century and the developments in the area of interpretative research, two issues clearly stand out: an increasing acceptance of qualitative research in the scientific community, including academic gatekeepers such as reviewers of journals, referees of one's personal work and search committees, as well as great quality improvements regarding methodological and method related issues. The former is important, but not part of this paper. The latter is reflected in the books addressed in this paper.

First, there is now a solid body of insight into the methodological and method related foundations of qualitative research that is not solely confined to some methodological or sociological geeks where it used to rest for a long time. On the contrary, the knowledge has spread out to a number of different disciplines within social science research, including management research. In some instances, qualitative approaches are of equal importance to their quantitative counterparts. For example, in the career sub-theme at the annual colloquium of the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS), qualitative papers have been at least as frequent as classical statistical analyses for a number of consecutive years. Second, it is by no means more or less user-defined what you do when you do qualitative research. The requirements in terms of data collection and especially data analysis have sharply risen and good qualitative research follows a more or less clearly identifiable set of steps and procedures when applying the chosen variant of qualitative analysis. This includes software-support as well as documentation of steps. Third, there is a broad spectrum of literature available to support beginners as well as experienced researchers in

different types of decisions, ranging from the basic question of which epistemological paradigm and which method is adequate for one's research question up to more technical matters of how to deal with specific issues when applying certain methods. Fourth, a look into management related journals such as *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly* or *Organization Studies* demonstrates that there are lots of good examples of excellent interpretative research published in top-tier journals that can serve as stimuli and role models.

While acknowledging the rapid and clearly visible progress in this area, it is also true that a number of issues remain unsolved and are in high need of further improvement. Disregarding important, but more detailed issues of specific methods, three issues seem to be especially important for the practical user: the presentation of qualitative data, the issue of generalisation and using qualitative methods in a cross-cultural/international comparative setting.

Looking at the works on qualitative research chosen for this article, it is interesting to note that they often devote a whole chapter to the presentation of qualitative research. This seems to reflect the experience of many qualitative researchers that it is not easy to adhere to some of the basic requirements of science, in particular transparency regarding ones procedures as well as providing a reader-friendly and comprehensible presentation of results. Compared to the sleek elegance of a regression equation, both a lengthy and somewhat tiring presentation of, say, results from content analysis or the curtailed presentation of results lacking the connection to one's text material are at a clear disadvantage. Clearly, this can have an adverse effect on reviewers looking at papers and on the target audience in general. Although some progress has been made in this respect by slowly establishing a more or less common understanding about how much of the material is cited verbatim and how it is referred to, this is only a far cry from the much more homogenous standards in the quantitative world. More discussion and especially more rigor in this area is highly needed in order to further advance dissemination of qualitative research.

Social science research without considerable effort to make generalisations will always be limited. Undoubtedly the interpretative understanding of single cases or specific situations is valuable and highly needed in order to better understand what goes on in social reality. Nevertheless, without some forms of generalisations such research ultimately is assigned to a small corner in the scientific community and of limited use when trying to explain broader social phenomena, let alone change things on a broader scale. Researchers convinced of a qualitative approach clearly see this problem and have put forward some ways to address this issue (see e.g. Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2008, 311 ff.). Even so, it is far from solved and clearly requires more work in order to open up new roads for insight as well as dissemination.

Given the sharp rise of studies and research teams involving different countries and cultures over the past three decades, there is a clear lack of advice for researchers working in a culturally and/or language-wise mixed setting who want to apply qualitative research methods. Take the example of a culture-comparative multi-country study by a culturally mixed team of researchers trying to better understand what individuals in different countries view as career success (for more on this practical example see e.g. Mayrhofer/Reichel 2009 forthcoming). Aiming at a variant



of content analysis, the interviews are conducted in the respective local language, audio-taped, and transcribed by the national members of the research team capable of speaking and understanding the language. An open coding process following the suggested paraphrasing  $\Rightarrow$  generalisation  $\Rightarrow$  categorisation procedure is applied to the available texts. This results not only in core categories that denote crucial dimensions of career success but also in a number of problems typical for interpretative analysis in a cross-national setting. Basically, there is the question of when to change from the local language to the *lingua franca* of the research group, in many cases most likely English. If the research team decides that at the level of generalisations and core categories English language should be used, this enhances comparability because everybody can access core results from all countries and increases robustness of the results because of concentration on main effects that 'survive' the translation. However, there is a price to pay for such a procedure. On the one hand, all the 'classical' translation problems emerge. For example, if German interviewees mention '*die Wirtschaft*' as a major influencing factor for emerging careers, an adequate translation is difficult. Of course, a number of words for '*Wirtschaft*' such as economy, industry, commerce, or business world are available. However, in German language this also can be a reference to abstract, collective actors ('*Das ist gut für die Wirtschaft*') or even have mythical-religious undertones ('*Wirtschaftswunder*'), both of which are much harder to get across the language barrier satisfactorily. At a very practical level, the citation of original interview passages in publications is a problem, too, since the global reach of many national languages is limited and many readers do not understand what is cited. However, a translation into English often reduces or even completely erases the specific flavour of the quotation. On the other hand, beyond classical translation problems a number of difficulties arise in the specific comparative research setting. There are potential losses of richness due to a different number and degree of language changes. For example, in a project there can be no change from the original language, e.g. when U.S. members of the team look at South African core categories, one language change, e.g. when Austrian researchers look at U.S. core categories or two language changes, e.g. when Malaysian members look at Spanish core categories formulated in English. In turn, this leads to losses of nuances, difficulties in consulting the original interview texts which sometimes is practically impossible for non-native speakers, e.g. in Japanese interviews, or a lack of density when discussing texts in culturally mixed interpretation groups or struggling for coding categories and interpretations. *Pars pro toto*, this example shows that in such a setting advice on how to deal with such problems is clearly lacking.

All in all, much room for further work and future book reviews ...

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