

## Qualitative Methods in Europe: The Variety of Social Research

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**Abstract:** This paper serves as an introduction to the special issue of *FQS* on "Qualitative Methods in Europe". It outlines the particular situation of qualitative research in this realm, which is characterised by diversity and unity. Diversity since the different intellectual traditions and institutional structures of the social sciences, which form the background of qualitative research differ significantly between the various countries. This variation indicates a number of traditional ways to do qualitative research that complement and complete the well-known Anglo-Saxon development. Unity, since despite all the differences, the various ways of doing research are characterised by the interpretive paradigm, a way of "doing" social sciences that builds on meaning, understanding and context.

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The papers presented in this special issue of *FQS* go back to the mid-term conference "The State of the Art of Qualitative Social Research in Europe" held on September 9-10, 2004 at the Technical University of Berlin. This conference formed a part of a series of conferences arranged by the Research Network "Qualitative Methods" in the European Sociological Association. Within the framework of this research network, a number of international conferences on qualitative methods have been realised since 1999. Indeed, one may venture to say that this initiative has been among the first to organise international conferences on qualitative methods in a way that takes internationality more seriously. By that we refer not only to the fact that speakers stem from different countries and nationalities. It is also a feature of these conferences that the studies presented there are influenced by the local and national traditions they represent. It is worth mentioning that the speakers are not restricted to European nations; there are speakers—and even board members—from other regions of the world, such as Asia and the Americas. However the quality of these conferences should not only be measured in terms of the standardisation of references and citations. On the one hand, the different nationalities at conferences are a positive factor, on the other hand there is the challenge of managing the differences. There are numerous ways of thinking, numerous ways of doing research and numerous ways of presenting results and this occurs when one invites people from many national backgrounds. One important reason for this challenge is, of course, that at meetings on the European level there is not one national scientific culture dominating exclusively. Accordingly, these meetings may be said to be inclusive rather than exclusive. That is to say that although one may concede that the Anglo-Saxon orientation has seriously influenced these European meetings, there is still a sense of variety and equality at the same time which is shared by researchers with very different backgrounds. To be frank, at times the challenge of this variety is hard to meet; at other times it gives a deep

insight in the cultural richness (which is not to say: relativity) of the scientific enterprise. [1]

The idea for this special issue is derived from the experience of this variety and unity of Qualitative Research. For if Europeans meet on any topic, the situation looks quite different from—for example—meetings of American researchers. Whereas the latter share a common language and a tight network of communication, so that everyone present knows what is happening, in Europe the situation is much more similar to what the Italians would call a "minestrone": The French might investigate things in a quite different manner than the Poles would, the Germans again differ from the Spanish, even if they relate to the same method, etc. Moreover, at the conferences at which we participated, we realised how little we know about issues which are of great importance to colleagues from other countries—even if they work in the very same disciplinary field. It seems to us that an international European scientific society has to address this problem, and it is for this reason that we have designed this special issue and invited colleagues to report about their countries. The goal, then, is to provide an overview of the activities in qualitative methods at the European level in a way that tries to include as much as possible, rather than excluding the unknown. That is to say, we do not want to reduce qualitative research to what is internationally dominating these days. A discipline fond of its passion for context and differences must also be open for its own internal differences. Thus, the overviews aim to present the state of the art of qualitative social research in various countries and nations. [2]

There is no doubt that the attempt for inclusiveness causes a number of problems among which the language problem is a serious one. In presenting and writing these texts in English, we are suppressing a huge number of languages present among the speakers—languages that are the mother tongue not only to the speakers but also to the respective field of qualitative methods in their countries. For the sake of communication, we have to be monolingual (allowing, at least, for varieties of English, as American English, British English and, in a way, "Continental English"). [3]

Despite this linguistic "unification", the papers clearly demonstrate that qualitative research is far from being monolithic. To be more precise, the particular development and situation of the social sciences in general and of sociology in particular vary a great deal in different European countries. Moreover, the role quantitative standardised methods play in the academic scene also differs enormously. Finally, there is the groundbreaking role of national avant-gardes of qualitative research in some countries, whereas in other countries qualitative research has been imported from outside. These differences—of language, of the institutional development and of the situation of qualitative sociology and of its sources—account for differences of what we commonly call culture. Also scientific enterprises such as qualitative research are imprinted by cultures—and not only by "epistemic cultures", but (as the papers clearly demonstrate) also by their surrounding institutions, traditions and political as well as economic contexts. This becomes visible particularly in countries which have passed through a

communist era, such as Poland and Slovenia. The impact of the specific national traditions of thinking on qualitative methods can be seen in most of the papers. [4]

Of course, the diversity would have been even greater if we had included other continents as well. However, we are confined to Europe (and to some extent influenced by the US). Even then, just a glimpse at the papers demonstrates that within this confinement—and despite the concentration on the (self-) selected countries we cover here—there is a diversity that is much broader and richer than virtually all textbooks on qualitative methods can cover. Indeed, one may wonder how little of this diversity is represented in the common lore on qualitative methods. The reason for this seems, on the one hand, to be due to the somewhat hegemonic situation of Anglo-Saxon and particularly American textbooks and journals in the field. There is, of course, no doubt that Anglo-Saxon and American qualitative research provides a common frame of reference for researchers from diverse national backgrounds. Yet, we would suggest, on the other hand, a further power that unifies the diversity. In our view, qualitative research of the various strands is held together by what may be called a common substance. The gist of qualitative research depends, on the one hand, to some extent on the weight of standardised quantitative methods, which characterise sociology and sociological curricula. Yet, it would not be enough to say that the gist of qualitative research can only be characterised *ex negativo*. On a positive note, one may suggest that it exists in an alignment with the *interpretive paradigm*. Interpretive paradigm according to WILSON (1970) referred to a *sociological paradigm* which is based on theories like symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnomethodology etc.—positions that stress the importance of investigating action and the social world from the point of view of the actors themselves. In a Kuhnian sense, this interpretive paradigm was supposed to substitute the "normative paradigm", represented by structural functionalism or Rational Choice theories. Qualitative research, as it exists nowadays, is supported by and dependent upon a line of thought that is orientated towards meaning, context, interpretation, understanding and reflexivity. This orientation becomes particularly obvious in the French case. Like each national scientific culture, France exhibits specific virtues, which also extend to elaborated styles in qualitative methods. In this respect, however, the impact of the interpretive paradigm had been particularly weak. This may be due to the acceptance of qualitative methods in anthropology or to an intellectual profile significantly different from, say, Germany or Italy. Whatever the reason, it appears that the boundary between qualitative and quantitative research is not as distinct as it is in most other countries. It is as if the weak impact of the interpretive paradigm on French methodological social scientific thinking was the cause that made the cleavage between qualitative and quantitative research appear much lesser importance in France than elsewhere. Therefore, to us *the unity of qualitative methods is (at least to some degree) rooted in a non-positivistic, interpretive paradigm*, which finds numerous national expressions. [5]

We would be happy if we had been able to present an overview on research done in all European countries. However, we could not find representatives from all countries prepared to produce such an overview. Thus, the Nordic countries are

certainly underrepresented; our wish to portray more Eastern European countries remained also unfulfilled. Nevertheless, we are glad to present a number of excellent papers on the state of qualitative methods in such a range of countries in a way that has never been presented before. The methods of these papers vary, of course: Some of the authors sent questionnaires to their colleagues, others used their profound knowledge on the national scenes and reconstructed the history of qualitative methods, others portrayed the policies of research agencies concerning qualitative methods. Of course, there is always a risk that some research is covered better than other research. This *caveat* notwithstanding, we would like to thank all the authors for accepting the difficult task of contributing their expertise to such an unprecedented overview like this. [6]

In the overviews, there is a clear bias towards the discipline of sociology. We are well aware of the fact that qualitative research is nowadays done not only in a large range of social scientific disciplines, but also in engineering, architecture or medicine etc. We do apology for this bias. As an excuse we may stress that the major reason for this sociological bias lies in the fact that it was a sociological initiative that prompted the idea of this volume. [7]

The papers in this volume are divided into the following structure. A few papers address the general tendencies perceivable in recent qualitative research, particularly in Europe and in the US. Then follows a series of overviews on the state of qualitative methods in Europe, sorted in alphabetical order according to the country they refer to. Finally, we have a number of papers representing new trends in specific methods which are introduced and presented by European qualitative researchers. [8]

Admittedly, such an overview cannot be, under the given circumstances, comprehensive. The volume does not claim to cover all fields, areas, or European cultures. Moreover, important methodological positions and linguistic areas are also missing and some areas are over-represented. Nevertheless, this special issue is the first and only attempt thus far at presenting the numerous strands of European qualitative research. It is also an attempt to hopefully link these various strands in such a way that also allows for diversity in unity. [9]

The intention of collecting such a variety of "state-of-the-art"-papers from different backgrounds and countries is not only for the purpose of taking an inventory, although this could be of interest as well. Our intention, which we share with many of the authors who contributed to this special issue, is that it will promote and intensify discussions and collaboration among and across the local cultures and diversities of qualitative research represented here. This will hopefully lead to fruitful outcome for the local cultures and discussions of and about qualitative methods. Our hope linked to this special issue is that it will, at the end of the day, lead to a stronger internationalisation of the discussion on qualitative research, research traditions and current developments in Europe and beyond—a kind of internationalisation that allows for unity and diversity. The role of *FQS* can be to provide a helpful forum to develop, receive and publish these discussions that follow as the result of the papers presented in this special issue. [10]

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