

In Dialogue with Business Research Data

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Abstract:

In this paper, we address epistemological and ontological premises of qualitative business research by discussing our own experiences of doing constructionist research. As such, paradigmatic issues of qualitative research have been debated for two decades in business studies. Our discussion builds on constructionist premises and is inspired by Hosking and Ramsey¹, who stress the importance of three issues in a constructionist research process; namely taking the social processes as a unit of analysis, treating ontology and epistemology as joined, and reflexive recognising of the researcher's participation in the research process. By deconstructing metatheoretical issues embedded in our research practices, we aim at sketching the contours of different paradigmatic approaches in qualitative research. We argue that the contours keep changing when they are approached from different ontologies and epistemologies. Our paper is an attempt to think how the contours unfold when doing research on social constructionist premises.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we discuss how a researcher's epistemological and ontological assumptions are embedded in the everyday practices of research process. We address metatheoretical questions that we as constructionist business researchers have faced when working on our research on organisational knowledge construction², dialogue strategy³ and female entrepreneuring⁴. Hosking and Ramsey⁵ stress the importance of three issues in a constructionist research process; namely taking the social processes as a unit of analysis, treating ontology and epistemology as joined, and reflexive

¹ Hosking & Ramsey (2000).

² Keso 1999.

³ Lehtimäki 2000.

⁴ Pietiläinen 1999

⁵ Hosking & Ramsey (2000).

recognising of the researcher's participation in the research process. In this paper, we address Hosking and Ramsey's proposals by discussing our own experiences of doing research, and thereby, deconstructing metatheoretical issues embedded in them.

As constructionist researchers, we join the argumentation that the everyday practices of theoretical knowledge production are in themselves constructing the way we understand reality. By this we mean that we view all choices and decisions made throughout the research process as potential issues of knowledge production. Also, we pay attention to the ways by which different scientific research practices position a researcher as a knowledge producer. The process of knowledge production emerges in the interaction between the metatheoretical assumptions of the researcher and the decisions being made on the every day research practices. Our experiences show how difficult it is to pay close attention to the terms of knowledge production and reflect one's own metatheoretical commitments inherent in one's own daily research decisions. Yet, without such reflection it is difficult to see how metatheory informs practicalities of empirical qualitative inquiry or in other words how the practical decisions incorporate epistemological and ontological decisions.

Our approach builds on discursive and relational theory⁶. We see a research process as an ongoing dialogue between a researcher and the data. Consequently, our attention focuses on what kinds of relationships do different discourses of knowledge production construct between the data and the researcher. By focusing on the relationship we try to keep track of how we become situated, i.e. how does the act of research situate the researcher and the data in relation to each other in knowledge production. To us data are the reality we, as researchers, meet and work with on a day-to-day basis when engaged in empirical research. It is in the interaction with research material and the researcher where we try to construct 'no-nonsense' accounts of the world and the phenomenon under study. Although, neither the data nor we as researchers stay in a vacuum during the analysis - it is a highly dynamic interaction - in empirical research process knowledge claims should basically be grounded on the representations of the data. To emphasise the co-active role of empirical material in a research process we use concepts 'data' and 'material' interchangeably.

In the following dialogue between the three authors, we discuss four metatheoretical approaches in qualitative research: social constructionism, constructivism, critical theory and scientific realism. We show how these different approaches differ in knowledge production processes and how these different processes produce differing outcomes. We discuss the approaches by reflecting our own experiences, and we have chosen these four metatheoretical approaches based on what our own research has been compared to. In the dialogue, we examine how different research approaches position a researcher as a knowledge producer in practical and metatheoretical levels. We focus our examination on five issues: purpose of the research, definition of knowledge, interaction between the researcher and the material, stance of the researcher in knowledge production and evaluation criteria for a qualitative research report.

2. Metatheoretical questions in qualitative research

2.1. Purpose of the research evolves with data

⁶ Foucault 1989, Gergen 1994, Dachler – Hosking 1995

Heidi: The idea of research as reality making, presented by Hosking and Ramsey, induces us to pay attention to the ongoing choices the researcher is making during the research process. Actually, using the concept of ‘choice’ already implicates a rationality, which conducts the research process and its every move. One of the choices to be made in a very early stage, when doing qualitative research, concerns the data. The researcher is often encouraged to start the research process by collecting data in order to get the dialog going between the researcher’s theoretical assumptions and her observations of the business world. I think it is often difficult to decide where to start from or what data would be interesting, when the process of defining the purpose of the study is still ongoing. Also, based on my experience, it is not unusual that the purpose of the study changes as the data collection proceeds and when the researcher becomes more and more deeply involved with her research material.

Hanna: That is definitely true at least in our research processes – we all have kept refining the purpose the research all along our research processes. I started my research project by data collection. I was interested in how does a new business field or community become formed in a local setting. I had previously done research on social networks in an international organisation, and from the network perspective the formation of the local ICT-business community in my hometown seemed very interesting. With this fairly vague interest in mind I started data collection. The purpose was to collect and analyse rich empirical material from different local actors within the field to better understand how each actor interprets the development of the field and their own position within the field. I aimed at providing a thick empirical description of the phenomena by presenting the perspectives of various actors, and to get an enriched understanding of how these actors actually perceive themselves and the business field⁷.

Tarja: I also got interested in the local ICT-business field and focused my work on local ICT business with its actors, but from a somewhat different angle. There was, and still is, a lot of private and public action going on around the development of the Finnish information society, and I wanted to find out how female entrepreneuring was doing among all this motion. I was afraid that the course of action would repeat the well-known pattern where women entrepreneurs will be marginalised early on and thus, will not benefit from the intensive investments on the development of a significant new business field. Following ideas from industrial district research, which considers a municipality a significant actor within the local business environment⁸, I started data collection from the city. This idea was supported by the Nordic gender equality thinking according to which public institutions should actively enhance women’s issues, including matters important to women entrepreneurs⁹. Thus, it was natural to me to collect data on the city Information society policy.

Hanna: The early steps in our research processes have been very similar. Also I started reading city strategies, following the idea that as a large institutional actor, a city has a significant impact on forming the field. However, at that time, I became familiar with constructionist thinking, and from that perspective the strategy documents started to seem interesting in, not so much what the content of the documents tells about the city and its decision makers, but how the ICT-field became constructed in the documents. As a result, I re-focused the purpose of my research, and ended up studying how does strategy discourse construct a city through production of actor positions, norms of action and desired future

⁷ Eriksson & Fowler & Whipp & Räsänen, 1996.

⁸ Cf. Sengenberger & Pyke 1992

⁹ Cf. Nilsson 1997

visions¹⁰. The new purpose of my research was to deconstruct the understanding or a story that a strategy discourse tells as natural or self-evident about the city. I approached the current strategy making practices as an ontological narrative or a discourse in which the city and its actors become what they are understood to be¹¹. Besides deconstructing, I also wanted to provide ideas on how the current practices of strategy making could be altered, so that new practices could be adapted to generate new understandings of the city. Now when looking back, you could say that I started my research on constructivist premises, and later on followed a social constructionist understanding of the world.

Tarja: Indeed, reflecting one's research experiences brings out premises you were not aware of before. My road to social constructionism is somewhat different. First, it was not visible to me that I analysed female entrepreneuring in city strategies following Marxist feminist thinking. I was deeply engaged in finding out in what ways women entrepreneurs are disadvantaged in order to give 'voice to the margin'. After a while, I realised that presupposing dominance and discrimination inhibited me from analysing, how gendering discourses are situationally constructed and how, in effect, space for female entrepreneuring emerges. I became interested in the dynamics of gendering processes, and its effects on female entrepreneuring. Deconstructing meaning making of gender in the data and constructing discourses of female entrepreneuring made me understand, how gendering (re)produces power relations.

Heidi: It seems that in both of your research processes the purpose of the study has been refocused according to the shift you have made in a metatheoretical understanding of the world. I also share this experience. When I started my research project on knowledge management, the purpose was to write a processual case study¹². The aim was to describe and explain, what is organisational knowledge base about and how has it developed and changed over time. In retrospect, I would say that on the premises of scientific realism, I believed to get a universal picture of what is organisational knowledge-base. By presenting a profound empirical qualitative analysis of one case, I hoped to be able to apply the findings to other similar settings¹³.

2.2. *Definition of knowledge*

Tarja: It is often so that, when you look back to your research process, you can see the changes that you have gone through, how you have produced knowledge and based on what observations. Sometimes the changes can be very radical. Along the learning process, the researcher could even question what becomes constructed knowledge in a research process, if she changes her metatheoretical stance. Various metatheoretical approaches produce different views on how to define knowledge. To a scientific realist researcher a pressing question is what kind of material is considered as facts while a critical theorist researcher would ponder what is the ideology behind the facts in the material. A constructivist researcher, in turn, would prefer naturally occurring material that would bring her close to the reality of actors. And yet, a constructionist researcher would look for material where to study social processes of meaning making.

Heidi: When looking back to my research process, I can see how my understanding of knowledge has evolved from realist to constructionist thinking. The company I have studied,

¹⁰ Cf. Dachler & Hosking 1995, Knights & Morgan 1991

¹¹ Cf. Barry & Elmes 1997, Boje 1999

¹² Cf. Pettigrew 1990

¹³ Marshall & Rossman, 1989, 145-146

Valmet Aircraft, has a 70-year history in designing and constructing aircrafts, and it has been an important player in the Finnish industrial history. First, the company was part of Finnish military industry, but since the 50s it became a profit-based business. The company did not, however, succeed to make profit and it was kept alive with public funding. Despite of this, the managers of the company spoke enthusiastically about technologically advanced knowledge base and unique core competences of Valmet Aircraft. The company was also famous for its progressive management training programs, where the latest managerial isms were introduced. When I spoke to the managers of the company in 1994, I found it amazing how it is possible that a company that claims to excel in high-technology and innovative thinking can continuously be unprofitable. As a business researcher, I was puzzled by this. I focused attention to what became defined as capability within the organisation and through what kind of processes.

Hanna: What kind of data did you collect to study the capability of a company? I am asking this, because a frequently heard question in qualitative research is, what is accurate material of studying a phenomenon like you have. Case study method paved the way for qualitative methods in business research and inspired discussions on primary and secondary data. The distinction implicates that there is a hierarchy of knowledge where some knowledges are more authentic than others. Also, the triangulation of data is considered important to ensure a holistic and factual picture of the phenomenon instead of relying on the researchers individual interpretations¹⁴. Case study method has been followed by a variety of research approaches, one of them being discourse analysis. Constructionist and discourse analytical approaches have not seen the subjectivity of the researcher as a problem because all knowledge is considered as being produced in subjective interpretations after all.

Heidi: I started to collect data scrupulously following the rules of triangulation. I wanted to gather all the information available of the company. So, I collected company histories, annual reports from 1975 – 1995, personnel magazines dating back to 70's. Also, I interviewed the managers several times and transcribed these two-hour interviews. All together my data consisted of 1121 pages, and a lot of background material. My aim was to produce a fine-grained description of the facts of the components of capabilities in the company, and thereby, to gain a holistic view of the competence. I believed that I could draw a picture of the true nature of capability from the facts in my data. The questions I posed to the data were, what core competence consisted of in the company, and how it had changed over time. As you can see, I started my research from the premises of the scientific realism. My aim was to prescribe what competence is and what it should be in other similar companies as well. I also wanted to show how the existing capabilities contribute to the success of a company.

Tarja: Your reflections on studying a company over such a long period, 70 years, illuminate well how the metatheoretical approach a researcher follows incorporate ideas and rules on how to define knowledge and what counts as accurate research material. We have now been talking about a realist approach to knowledge. What are your experiences in defining knowledge from a constructionist viewpoint? You had already collected extensive data, how did your relation to the data change after taking a constructionist turn?

Heidi: My original purpose was to do content analysis and I did experiments with the analysis software called NUDIST. There are also other analytical coding programs such as ATLAS/ti and The Ethnograph but I did not use any of these programs in my final analysis. The analysis software paved the way to studying discourses and meaning making; after the first

¹⁴ Cf. Yin 1989, Stake 1995

experiments with the analysis software, I started to pay attention to words that people spoke, and to the descriptions different people used when explaining what is competence and what is not. At that point, I realised that different people seemed to have very different views of the same phenomena, which in my study were, capability and core competence. This understanding led me to worry, how to combine these different views to put together a holistic view of the company's capabilities.

Hanna: This is interesting. It sounds to me that you were struggling with the premises of constructivism. In constructivist viewpoint, an individual actor does not find the facts of reality but joins in constructing them¹⁵. Accordingly, in the interviews you were interested in how each manager talked about the company and its core competence. You were aiming at discovering the knowledge creation processes shared by the individuals at the company, i.e. their experiences and perceptions of reality.

Heidi: Yes, I think you are right. Later on in my research process I realised that the whole data represented managers' insights of the company. It never occurred to me to collect material on the perceptions of the employees. Even if you think about the personnel magazines or company histories, you can see how they carry the official voice of the company. Of course, this is the basis on which several of the critical theorists criticise the prevailing business research literature. This would be a very interesting point from the critical theory perspective. They could criticise my research for ignoring the marginalised voices of the company¹⁶. I have presented the views of those in power as factual truths and not paid any attention to the views of the people with less formal authority. As a result, it could be argued that the conclusions of my study are biased.

Tarja: From a critical theory perspective your study could also be criticised for promoting dominating managerial ideology because you do not problematise the hierarchical power structure. As such, it could be argued that your study acts for the elite. However, as a social constructionist researcher, I would not think that interviewing only the managers and analysing publicly available documents about the company would bias research findings to enhance the interest of the dominating groups. Instead, within the social constructionism, we assume that both managers and employees are actor positions, which are constructed by continuous power/knowledge negotiations¹⁷. Of course, in an old company like Valmet Aircraft, many well established procedures and ways of thinking support certain versions of capabilities. However, they require constant recycling across time and place by the actors to maintain their unquestionable position. What becomes defined as knowledge involves always power and context. As Heidi's research shows, knowledge is, indeed, discursive.

2.3. *Interaction between the researcher and the material*

Hanna: Compared to the vast amount of data that Heidi collected, the material I collected for my doctorate research sounds small in size. I was interested in how does the strategy discourse construct the city and studied strategy making in my hometown, the City of Tampere¹⁸. The material comprises the written strategy document of the Tampere region 'Tampere Region Success Strategy 2000+ (1996) and the strategy document of the City of Tampere 'Information is the Key to the Future – Guidelines of City Policies for Year 2000

¹⁵ Czarniawska-Joerges 1992, Boyce 1995

¹⁶ Kunda 1992.

¹⁷ Knights 1992.

¹⁸ Tampere is a large inland city in the Nordic Countries and a third largest city in Finland with 300.000 citizens.

and Beyond' (1997). That totals to 16 pages of text. Also, 11 interviews of city officials, who have been involved in strategy making, were analysed as a part of the study.

Tarja: Interestingly, the small amount of empirical material in your work has raised repeatedly questions. People have been puzzled by whether it is at all possible to make a rich description of a strategy process with such a small amount of data. I think the questions show how, at least in the Finnish business research context, we are primarily used to case studies with large data. The principals of triangulation are the first thing to come into mind when the amount of data calls our attention. Certainly, 100 pages of data would not easily make a solid ground for a rich description if triangulation were an important guideline for data collection.

Hanna: That is certainly true. But what is important in analysing discourses, is how meanings are being produced in the data¹⁹, and it can be argued that for such an analysis small data is even more adequate than large data. That is because, when studying meaning making practices, a researcher does a close reading of the material questioning every sentence and deconstructing the taken-for-granted meanings of the words. From this perspective, even a small amount of data is loaded with meanings. I find the recent developments in discourse analysis interesting. Some discourse analysts have come to prefer naturally occurring data (e.g. official documents, media texts) as the most suitable data for studying meaning making²⁰. Also, it has been suggested that observational data is preferable for studying subtleties of fragmented every-day meaning making in organisations²¹. I think that these views point out how different ontologies and epistemologies are used to develop methodological argumentation in constructionist research.

Heidi: Had you followed a scientific realist approach you should have also gathered material for instance by observation, collecting organisational documentations of the strategy process and perhaps even longitudinal interview data. As Steve Woolgar²² says, in 'true' triangulation, it is important to use a variety of reporting and recording strategies and also a variety of representation. In scientific realist approach, it is important that the researcher gathers material, which reflects the reality as completely as possible to enable her to make a truthful description of the researched phenomenon.

Consequently, in the interaction with the data, the researcher should be cautious to detect any indications, which point, for instance, to lying, sectional interests or strong emotional commitments. For her own part, the researcher should be aware of her own subjective opinions and attitudes to prevent partial judgements. Within scientific realism, the researcher is careful to distance herself from the data and the principals of triangulation give her concrete instructions how she can interact with the data in an impartial, objective manner.

Hanna: The interaction between the researcher and the material is quite a different question to a constructionist researcher compared to a scientific realist researcher. The focus shifts from the quantitative criteria of empirical material to the dialogue between the researcher and the researched. When I studied strategy making my attention focused not only on the meaning making practices in the documents and the interviews but also how I, as a business strategy researcher and a member of the Finnish society, factualised my interpretations of the data. What I mean is that as a researcher I produced knowledge claims of the phenomenon as I was analysing it in the material. In the dialogue between the researcher and the researched, theory

¹⁹ Burr 1995

²⁰ Jokinen & Juhila & Suoninen 1999

²¹ Cf. Czarniawska 1999

²² Woolgar 1988, p. 72

and the empirical data are in a constant interaction with each other - a researcher uses empirical data to question her theoretical assumptions and she uses her theoretical understandings to interpret her data. You could say that a constructionist researcher builds the road while walking it.

Heidi: That is different compared to a constructivist approach as well. Similarly to a constructionist researcher, a constructivist researcher considers empirical material as not presenting the reality but as containing the reality. However, in your research, a constructivist researcher would have been interested in the accounts of the managers who have participated in the strategy process. As such, any data that would provide personal narratives of the strategy process and participation in it would have been interesting to a constructivist researcher. In the interaction between the researcher and the data, the data is given a high status as accounts where actors' versions of reality are represented.

Tarja: I see parallel concerns between social constructionism and critical theory, because both advocate ongoing reflection of research process to avoid reproduction of dominant ideas²³. When I studied how strategy discourse genders entrepreneuring, I was concerned how the dominant ideas or ideologies, i.e. competitive masculinities, were embedded in the empirical material. My aim was to create interpretations, which make visible the power relations that exclude female entrepreneuring from the future of ICT business. The approach I adopted, when analysing the city strategy documents, enabled me to relate myself to the material as an independent critical researcher, who is able to see behind the ideologies working in the 'surface' of the material. I learned that it is actually the idea of critique, which I have to reflect on continuously. Although, critique allows the researcher to challenge and question the legitimacy of the dominant, taken-for-granted ideas, it at the same time easily positions the researcher outside her empirical material. Paying attention on how we work with the empirical material does reveal that the interaction with the data, you could say, tells as much about the researcher as about the researched phenomena.

2.3. *Stance of the researcher in knowledge production*

Heidi: One important thing that calls our attention is how the powerful position of the knower is easily available to the researcher in scientific inquiry. According to Foucault²⁴, one should not neglect the insight that scientific discourse in itself constructs a researcher as a knower and the phenomenon as a research object, the known. In the four different approaches we examine in this paper, the stance of the researcher is argued differently in knowledge production. When we argue for paying attention to a dialogue between the researcher and the material we should also stay alert of the knowledge positions the interaction calls us to take. I think that Tarja's research process would help us to elaborate this issue little bit more.

Tarja: In my research on gender and entrepreneuring in the ICT sector, I am interested in what are femalenesses in entrepreneuring in practice. My material consists of city strategy documents, media articles, interviews and participant observations. One of the big challenges I have faced in my work is connected to my commitment to feminism. I believe in the 'true' spirit of Nordic equality discourse that women and men should have equal opportunities to venturing, and therefore I was interested to study female entrepreneuring in a masculinised business context. What I think calls for attention in my case is how to conduct research, which strikes balance between furthering women's issues and producing scientific knowledge. When

²³ cf. Alvesson & Sköldberg 1999; Hosking & Dachler & Gergen 1995

²⁴ 1989

talking about a researcher stance in knowledge production process, I could ask myself, wouldn't I, as a woman and a feminist, be biased to study female entrepreneuring.

Hanna: It is obvious that your emancipatory interests affect your research setting and your conclusions. As a constructionist researcher I would not consider it problematic, but definitely an issue to be brought up as a part of reporting the research process. The question of bias is relevant particularly from the scientific realist point of view. The concept of 'bias' in itself calls us to understand that universally, it can be defined, what is non-biased, right, knowledge and biased, wrong or non-adequate knowledge. In that approach, the production of objective knowledge should not be affected by subjective values and the effects of subjective values should be minimised.

Tarja: It is easy for me to agree with that, because obviously, my commitments are incorporated in what I consider worth studying, what theoretical tradition I draw on, or what aspects I emphasise. In this research, female entrepreneuring in ICT attracted my attention because the industry is economically important and highly masculine. There are only few women entrepreneurs in the business. Accordingly, Nicefactory Ltd – the business actor in my study, is particularly interesting, because it is one of the firms that the Finnish media names as exceptional²⁵ - a digital services company, or as the owners prefer – a media operator company, owned by two women. The company also attracted a lot of media attention by launching the first Finnish net service, Nicehouse.fi, targeted for women. It employs 8 salaried people and works with around 10 freelancers. Nicefactory Ltd. operates in three lines of business: Net services for entertainment, e-learning environments, and visual design of net services for organisational clients. Using scientific realist's terms, I would say that I had chosen an intrinsic case study²⁶.

Heidi: The question of bias is interesting. In critical theory, bias stands from the research setting and from a researchers dismissal to take into account and reflect her own theoretical commitments. Critical theorists argue, that the marginalized views are hidden by the dominant discourses, and therefore, the researcher needs to search for theoretical insights that allow her to uncover the dynamics of domination²⁷. As such, the subjective values are taken for granted and accepted as being embedded in all knowledge. Critical theory research aims at revealing how subjective values are inherent in the 'objective' concepts and theories used.

Tarja: Critical view is well developed and fairly influential in feminist research²⁸. Had I followed this approach, I would have set as my research agenda to reveal how business environment is structured in ways, which hinder women to become entrepreneurs and take successful entrepreneurial action. The focus would be on revealing how institutionalised patriarchal gender relations marginalize women's entrepreneuring in the ICT industry.

Hanna: A constructivist researcher would share your desire to be sensitive to different viewpoints and argumentations that construct the multiplicity of female entrepreneuring. From a constructivist stance one could argue that we have common lifeworlds, which are constructed in social interaction and thereby, shared. A constructivist researcher would follow

²⁵ C.f Niskanen 2000

²⁶ Stake 1995

²⁷ Alvesson & Skjöldberg 2000

²⁸ Campioni & Grosz 1991

this idea by holding that there are always a myriad of basically individual rationalities, which become shared in the interactions between individuals²⁹.

Tarja: Yes, and as a constructionist, I call attention to the commonly circulated discourses, which construct gender in contextually rational ways. In my research this means that I am interested in how discourses of entrepreneuring call upon bodied women entrepreneurs to act according to discourse specific responsibilities and rights of an entrepreneur.

Heidi: In our research team we are all female and that, I believe, is present in the way we do research. Gender is such a hegemonic and invisible process, we could argue a ontological category, that it pervades all scientific action. For instance, gender challenges us to pay attention to issues such as reference practices or promoting gender-neutrality. Being a woman and a researcher certainly has implications for the research process. As constructionist researchers, we consider ourselves as part of our research settings and instead of trying to hide it we try to become aware and reflect how our commitments make us understand the material the way we do. Furthermore, an attempt should be made to write ourselves visible in the research texts. This leads us to the final topic of this paper.

2.4. *Evaluation criteria for qualitative research*

Hanna: There is one more point that I would like us to discuss about - the evaluation criteria for qualitative research. One can always claim that qualitative analysis is based on subjective interpretation. How to evaluate what counts as scientific knowledge is not very straightforward. Depending on the metatheoretical orientation, criteria for evaluating the research vary somewhat.

Heidi: I think this topic becomes important, as the field of qualitative inquiry gets wider. We see more and more research, which is not reported in a familiar or conventional way. We encounter novel research settings, new research questions, unconventional methods and unexpected results. The concrete research reports have dispositions, which do not resemble other reports. What I find interesting is that due to these changes the well-established criteria for evaluating qualitative research on scientific realist premises do not apply well anymore. The criteria seem not to grasp the depth of the novel research practices, and consequently, do not seem to provide proficient tools for evaluation.

Tarja: From the constructionist premises I would like to call attention to how the format of the research report in itself is one way of validating the research. The research report in itself reproduces research discourse – when presenting the findings and the process of the research in conventional established ways, research becomes scientific knowledge. It has been discussed for several years in business studies that even the case research following the realist premises does not fit well with the traditional research reporting format. The issue becomes even more pressing when talking about new interpretative methods. For instance, when writing constructionist research, the format becomes ever more important as the current practices in reporting cut the theoretical wings of constructionist research.

Heidi: One way I tried to tackle this issue was to start my research report with a personal story which talked about my own experiences on knowledge production. In the story I tell how I have dealt with feelings of being incompetent, when building a doll-house with my brother when I was young, and how I pondered what were the reasons, why I was not claimed

²⁹ Czarniawska 1993

to be the knower. With this story I set the stage for thinking what is the right way of knowing and deciding who has the right knowledge.

However, not all fellow researchers accepted this as an essential part of a scientific work.

Hanna: I would like to enhance work on providing guidelines and ideas on novel ways of scientific writing and unconventional ways of reporting research findings. In my research on strategy discourse, I followed the guidelines that say that writing convincing research and providing a sound argumentation require using the ‘right’ referring practices, formal language with plenty of theoretical concepts and writing practices that efficiently factualise the findings. Following these guidelines, and wanting to convince everyone that I am competent in using theoretical concepts, I ended up producing a very single voiced report. Funny enough, the key point in my research was to deconstruct the single voiced practices in strategy making and to argue for multivoice strategy practices.

Tarja: I think we all share the idea that one evaluation criterion for qualitative research should be, how well the researcher makes visible her position as knowledge producer. Rather than evaluating the suitability of various kinds of data as such, focus should be on the knowledge production processes in which criteria for suitability are discursively negotiated. I believe, that qualitative, and discourse theoretical business research in particular, would benefit from insightful discussions on the processes and practices of knowledge production and from making power/knowledge claims emerging in them visible.

Hanna: This has been a fun and insightful discussion. Let’s now turn to the table in which we have organised all these thoughts and ideas.

3. The role of the researcher in different metatheoretical approaches

We have put together the above reflections into a table. In the rows of the table, we elaborate how four different metatheoretical approaches construct what is an appropriate purpose of the research, nature of knowledge, data-researcher interaction, researcher’s presumption of what counts as scientific knowledge, evaluating criteria for research report, and finally, the role of the researcher as knowledge producer. These issues illuminate what we have found as metatheoretically important in our research processes.

In the columns, we present four metatheoretical approaches from the point of view of the constructionist research. With this categorisation we aim at organising the questions we have been asked by exploring and describing the metatheoretical assumptions, we presume, are present in the questions. We are not claiming that our categorisation is how the scientific world is or should be labelled. Rather, with this table we invite scholars to multivoiced dialogue to discuss the underlying assumptions in other historically and socially located research processes.

Depending on the metatheoretical understanding, each research aims at making a difference in the body of scientific business knowledge, one way or the other. Each metatheoretical approach incorporates particular understandings of what is an interesting and significant focus of investigation. Accordingly, each approach calls a researcher to evaluate, what is her position as a knowledge producer and what should be done with the new knowledge that the research generates.

We have named researcher positions in each research paradigm according to what we see as the role of the researcher as knowledge producer in the academic community. First, we call *the constructionist researcher an 'empowerer'*. She explores the taken-for-granted, questions the self-evident, and examines herself as the participant in knowledge production process. The term social constructionism embraces many variations in theoretical perspective, interests, and methods. According to Hosking³⁰, the common concern in constructionistic research is the interest in the processes through which knowledge is constructed in everyday activities. As such, the processes of knowing are shifted from a knowing mind to coordinated actions, and thus, knowing and doing are joined. Accordingly, 'doing science' and scientific claims to knowledge can be considered as everyday activity.

A self-reflection by Hanna: What I find challenging is that this approach calls for questioning much of the currently taken-for-granted. This easily leads to a feeling that we are promoting revolution or bringing forth revolutionary ideas. As a constructionist researcher, I feel with my research I can provide alternative vistas to see how things might be but not to tell how things factually are. Besides deconstruction I also wish to provide alternative solutions to current constructions. The aim in my research is to recognise the discursive power relations and be a provider of arguments to understand meaning making processes in everyday practices of business life.

Second, we call *the constructivist researcher an 'enthusiastic participant'*, who brings forth alternative interpretations of reality, legitimises different schemas and allows for parallel understandings of reality. To a constructionist researcher a challenge in constructivistic research is, how to avoid downplaying the questions of power intertwined with different individual perceptions. In the constructivist research, the power tends not to be articulated as closely connected to actor positions. From the constructionist viewpoint it could be argued that the constructivist research tends to produce a continuous subject³¹.

According to constructivists, organisations have neither nature nor essence; they are what people perceive them to be³². The purpose of the research is to provide rich empirical descriptions of a given event, case-company or situation. As a result, the aim is to gain a deepened understanding, more refined and enlightened understanding of the lived realities. An insiders view of the phenomenon and authentic accounts are valued in this metatheoretical approach.

A self-reflection by Heidi: In some ways, I am inclined to think like constructivists that enriched understandings, i.e. bringing forward different possible interpretations of a given situation, enlarge our possibilities to act in ways unfamiliar before. I want the world to understand what are all the places where innovative ideas can come from, ideas for developing their activities. This, I argue, requires that defining what is valuable knowledge, or considered as knowledge, has to be understood in a new way – with a new way I mean that knowledge is discursive.

Third, we call *the researcher following the critical theory an 'intellectual change agent'*, who is an active speaker for the marginalized. Critical Theory and other ideology oriented theories aim at change through critique, giving voice to margins, and emancipation. The purpose of

³⁰ 2000

³¹ Denzin & Lincoln :127.

³² Czarniawska 1993: 9.

research based on critical theory is similar to constructionist research in that research aims at empowerment and emancipation. From the constructionist perspective the question arises, however, whose empowerment and emancipation is in question. That is, whose reality is taken as an interesting research subject. Both critical theory and constructionist researchers often choose the perspective of the under privileged or those in non-power positions. In organisational research this could, for instance, be the employees.

The difference between these two metatheoretical approaches is in that the critical theory researchers are interested in how do the under-privileged participate themselves in the production of their own suppression. From the constructionist view point, in turn, everyone being in a power or being suppressed are discursive actor positions. Knowledge is connected to these actor positions, which are not accessible to everyone. Access to actor position is restricted. An interesting point to a constructionist research would, in turn, be to examine the knowledge-power relations that construct the positions of those in power and those suppressed.

A self-reflection by Tarja: My research combines passions from both the critical theory perspective and the constructionist research approach. Critical theory is present in my research through the idea of feminist emancipation. I believe that the knowledge I produce has impacts on women entrepreneurs' space of action. This means that I aim changing business practices in ways that enhance women entrepreneurs' and business women's possibilities to enact their business desires in ways they find suitable or attractive for themselves. This is really important to me. I want to make female entrepreneurs' business practices as valued as male entrepreneurs' practices – I argue, that currently, female entrepreneuring is naturally considered as hobby like activity, not business to be taken seriously. I want to contribute to an understanding that female entrepreneurs' businesses are real businesses without a connotation of less valued, not so important. I want to change the world so that female entrepreneurs do not have to defend their business choices.

Finally, we propose that *a scientific realist researcher could be called an 'analytical expert'* who describes and explains how things factually are, and produces a wholesome research based view of a phenomenon. In business studies perhaps the most used qualitative research approach is case –study method. Often, case study methodology builds on the premises of scientific realism. The role of the researcher is to generate better understanding of the phenomenon and to add new explanations to the existing pool of knowledge³³.

A comment by Heidi: At the moment, I feel, that as a scientific realist researcher doing research would be much more straightforward. It seems that I would not have to constantly reflect my metatheoretical assumptions and choices or continuously question my position as an analytical knowledge producer. Instead, I could rely on the well-established qualitative research methods and, as long as I took care to follow them meticulously and analytically, I could be an expert in describing and explaining how things factually are. As a scientific realist researcher, I would take care in presenting the research results as facts - I mean, even though I would report the limits of the study I would not question the premises of my knowledge production. In other words, I would not rock my own boat, so to speak, in order to avoid inviting others to discuss my premises. As a constructionist research, I feel, that is exactly what I am expected to do. Well, I wonder if scientific realists would agree with me on this one.

³³ Marshall & Rosmann, 1989, 21

TABLE 1. Four paradigms in qualitative research.

[Insert table 1 about here.]

4. Conclusion

Paradigmatic issues of qualitative research have been debated for two decades in business studies. As constructionist researchers and educators of postgraduate students, we have experienced how difficult it is to explain the paradigmatic ways of understanding scientific knowledge production. The level of abstraction rises easily high, and the discussions drifts away from the practical questions someone is facing when working with empirical material. In this paper, we call attention to epistemological and ontological premises of different metatheoretical approaches commonly used in qualitative business research. Our purpose in this article is not to show how different theoretical approaches could be combined to form a synthesis. Rather, our purpose is to sketch the contours of different metatheoretical approaches in qualitative research without building a border war between different metatheoretical approaches in qualitative business research. We argue that the contours keep changing when they are approached from different ontologies and epistemologies. Our paper is an attempt to think how the contours unfold when doing research on social constructionist premises.

Through reflection of our own experiences, we have attempted to share our experiences on how we as researchers encounter and deal with the fuzzyness of methodological decisions a researcher faces when doing research. We argue that identifying paradigmatic discourses present in these every day research practices empowers a researcher to generate a competent argumentation for her choices and decisions. All our research processes could be characterised as processes of continuous interaction between the empirical data and theoretical readings.

The researcher's own process of learning is a strong determinant in directing the practical everyday choices being made on data and the purpose of the research. Yet, it is very challenging to reflect on one's metatheoretical understandings on an ongoing basis. We propose, that further discussions on qualitative research practice in business research should revolve, particularly, around what kind of reporting practises would enable an ongoing reflection and how to write the researchers' learning processes into open.

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