Chapter 5
Qualitative Data and Methods

We classify as we can. But we do classify.
Claude Levi-Strauss

5.1 Introduction

The term 'qualitative method' refers to a number of rather different scientific methods within the human and social sciences, such as Hermeneutics, Grounded Theory, Phenomenology and Ethno-methodology. The contrast to 'qualitative' is 'quantitative'; Qualitative methods aim at the collection and analysis of non-quantitative, i.e. qualitative data. But what does this amount to?

As we saw in the previous chapter, if one wants to make a quantitative comparison between collected data, then these data must be such that one can at least compare differences between observations. That is to say, it must be meaningful to ask oneself if the difference between the items o_1 and o_2 is greater, or lesser, than that between o_3 and o_4. There are many cases within the humanities and the social sciences in which it is either impossible, or inadequate, to make such comparisons. For example, take Emile Durkheim's concept of *degree of integration in a society* discussed in Chap. 3. Naturally, one must measure various variables, such as how many parties or holidays are celebrated in a society during a year, in order to get some sort of measure of the degree of integration. However, no single variable will be sufficient for a good picture of the degree of integration. One must somehow sum over all the variables studied such that each addition is based on some more or less arbitrary rule for how the different factors are to be weighed. Hence it is not meaningful to operationalize the concept *degree of integration* to an extent that results in an interval, or quotient scale. One must be satisfied with the ability to make a rank ordering. Another way saying the same thing is to point out that 'the degree of integration' is not a quantitative concept, even though it may appear to be.

Those that use qualitative methods do not usually motivate their choice of method by arguing that quantitative measurements cannot be made. Rather, they argue that the particular phenomena under investigation, and the associated questions one may pose, are qualitative in nature. In these situations, one does not want to find out *how much* of something there is, but rather *what type of character*

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something has. For example, a hermeneutic would perhaps want to interpret the content of a historical or literary text, while a phenomenologist would want to research how certain individuals experience their existence, their life and the world around them.

To say of something that it is thus and so is to decide which concepts the particular phenomenon falls under. To make such a decision is to make a *classification*. We can thus draw the conclusion that qualitative methods can be characterized by the fact that the data being collected are classified; that is, qualitative observations form a nominal scale. But this is not sufficient for a definition of the qualitative method, since this characterization is too broad. By this definition, the determination of blood types would count as a qualitative method. In one sense, it is obvious that the determination of someone's blood type is a measurement that results in a qualitative statement. However, the term 'qualitative methods', as it is normally used, means something different.

It strikes me that all qualitative methods have yet another thing in common; namely, that the phenomena one is studying are *meaningful*, and the primary aim of qualitative methods is to identify the *meaning* or *significance* of texts, symbols, actions, and so forth. Meaning and significance are concepts that belong to the *intentional realm*. Therefore, I propose the following definition of qualitative method:

***Definition of qualitative method*:** A scientific method is qualitative if and only if it aims at the classification of phenomena with respect to categories containing an explicit, or implicit, intentional component.

But what is meant by 'meaningful', 'significance' and 'intentional'?

5.2 Intentionality and Meaning

The word 'intention' is often treated as synonymous with 'purpose' or 'aim'. Intentions are involved in human actions. However, within philosophy 'intention' has been given a broader meaning. The philosopher Franz Brentano (1838–1917) observed that all descriptions of mental phenomena can be analysed into two components: the mental *act* and the *content*. When Lisa says 'I hope we will have a nice summer', the mental act is the act of hoping, and it has the content 'we will have a nice summer'. One cannot hope for nothing in particular. One must hope for something definite; that is, the act of hoping must have content. This content, towards which the act is directed, is often called the act's *intentional object*. Brentano held that all mental phenomena are thus directed towards an intentional object.

Most, or perhaps all, mental states fall into the following three groups:

- perceptions,
- emotions,

- propositional attitudes (believing, hoping, wishing, thinking, etc.).

All of these mental acts are in a certain sense *directed* towards an object. When we observe we direct our attention to some object, which becomes the *intentional object*. (There is an important distinction to keep in mind here: sensations are not, while perceptions are, object-directed. Pain is a sensation not a perception, since there is no object towards which the pain is directed (headache is not pain directed towards the head, it is a type of pain), while seeing e.g. a fox is a perception.) Our emotions are also directed: we are mad *at* someone, thankful *for* the presents, and anxious *over* the impending examination. In all these situations, we indicate the intentional component of the mental phenomenon with a preposition followed by a description of the object of intention, towards which the mental act is directed. Finally, propositional attitudes such as believing, hoping, knowing and wishing are directed. The object toward which an attitude is directed is more often called its 'content' and is expressed by the proposition following the word 'that'. Such propositions may even contain objects of fantasy such as Santa Claus or Hamlet. (There is a philosophical problem with the semantics of sentences where such objects are non-existent; but this is beyond the scope of the present discussion.)

Propositional attitudes are closely connected to actions; usually we call something done 'an action' when we take for granted that it is connected to a belief or conscious desire. When we think that the doing is not associated with any belief or conscious desire we call it behaviour. Hence, we should distinguish between action and behaviour: actions always have an intentional component, whereas behaviours don't.

Choosing to do nothing in a given situation with the intent that some event will take its course without interference can also be considered an act precisely because the agent has a belief about what will happen, and a desire that the expectation materialize.

We can thus describe all mental phenomena by indicating the mental act being performed and the object towards one's mind is directed. Directedness, or intentionality, is a necessary component of mental acts.

Meaningful phenomena are phenomena that either contain an intentional component themselves, or else are more indirectly constituted by an intentional property. Thus actions, and the results of those actions, are meaningful phenomena in the same way as texts, social institutions and conventions, values, norms and artefacts. This is because all of the above phenomena are either directly constituted by intentions (collective intentions constitute social institutions, as will be discussed in Sects. 5.8 and 5.9), or the result of such intentions.

How is one to research the meanings – the intentional components – of these phenomena? Can they be observed? Do they exist per se, or are they created in the very act of observation? I shall attempt to illuminate these questions in the following three examples.

1. A stone found during a stroll through the woods seems, at least at first, to have no meaning. Yet, if we look closer, we may find that it is not just any old stone, but that it shows signs of having been formed by human hands. This unusual shape

gives the stone a sort of meaning. Though we may not be able to give details as to what that meaning is, we can observe that it has meaning in that its form is the result of conscious human action. Once we have convinced ourselves that this form is human-made, we ask ourselves, what is this meaning; why does the stone have this particular shape? Is the stone a tool or a cultural expression? In asking such questions we assume that someone had a particular purpose in mind when he, or she, crafted the stone. It is an archaeologist's job to interpret the stone's features in order to discover what this purpose was; thus allowing us to understand how the stone was used (e.g. to clean animal hides).

Does this stone have meaning that we discover, or is it that the stone only acquires a meaning once it has been studied? Difficulties arise here from common language use as well as ontological assumptions. If we say that the stone has meaning that we can discover, then this meaning is a property of the object, which is independent of the observer. If, instead, we say that the stone acquires a meaning *for us*, then this meaning is more likely a relation between the observer and the stone. One cannot then say that the stone has any meaning in itself, but rather that meaning arises in the observer's interaction with it. In this case, I think it reasonable to say that the stone has meaning; namely, its function with respect to the way humans used it. We can find, or fail to find, this meaning, but we should note that the stone's meaning is not a physical property of the stone like its mass or shape, but rather an intentional one.

2. The meaning of certain actions and artefacts is a much more difficult question. Money is an everyday example of this difficulty. Certain physical objects such as thin cylindrical pieces of metal, small printed notes, and electronic currency are considered to be money. However, the monetary value of these objects is not a physical property of them. Of course, a 10 £ banknote must have certain distinctive physical features, such as the print of a 10 £ pound note. Yet, it is not the print that gives the money its value. Rather, it is a *collective agreement*, or attitude, that constitutes its meaning. When a country suffers inflation, this collective attitude changes dangerously as people loose faith in their currency. Even though no physical aspects of the monetary objects have been changed, the normal value still goes down. This shows that what changes is, in fact, the collective attitude.

   Most of the time, these collective attitudes are unconscious. We do not normally think of banknotes as pieces of paper that have come to be treated as money by way of a collective agreement. It is hardly ever the case that someone thinks, 'I am handing over a piece of paper, and I recognize that everyone considers this piece of paper to be money'. One cannot look at a banknote, or an electronic currency statement, and see what makes it money. In order to determine what makes certain objects money we must observe how people interact with these physical objects, or physical states (electronic currency is a physical state of a bank's computer). For example, it was through direct observation of Bosnia and Croatia during the war from 1991 to 1996 that we could see how the Deutsche Mark and cigarettes were treated as money, but the official Yugoslavian Dinar was not. The Dinar had lost all its value.

Assuming that collective intentions, on which social institutions are founded, are fictitious creations of a researcher describing these social institutions, we are faced with the possibility of not being able explain a large number of phenomena and human behaviour. From a methodological point of view, these collective intentions play a role similar to that of electrons in physics. We cannot *directly* observe electrons[1] or intentions; yet, we have good reasons to believe that both exist. If we were to assume that, for example, electrons do not exist, then a large number of observable phenomena would be nearly impossible to explain or understand. Similarly, it is rational to assume the existence of collective intentions as the constitutive elements of social institutions, since this assumption allows us to understand many aspects of the human social behaviour. Thus it is reasonable to say that the meaning that social institutions have, i.e. the collective intentions behind them, both exist and their effects can be observed. Importantly, the institutions so spawned are not the result of a single individual's intentionality, but rather their meaning is shaped by the interaction of many. It is this *collective* aspect that ensures objectivity and observer-independence of these kinds of social institutions. In summary, we can recognize a particular social institution by observing how people relate to each other and the physical objects with which they interact.

3. Finally, there is a class of phenomena for which there are three very different positions regarding their meaning. Examples of this class notably include works of art. The meaning of a work of art can be (i) the intention of its creator, (ii) some sort of inherent quality of the artefact itself, or (iii) the resonance the artefact excites in the present culture.

Thus, the question regarding a work of art's true meaning is ambiguous. In particular, this is the case within the literary sciences, where one finds an on-going discussion regarding whether inquiry into the interpretation of a literary work should be directed at the author's life and context, the text itself, or the work's interaction with its present social context. This question strikes me as regarding what is most interesting, or fruitful, and not as a question about what is most accurate and true.

Meaning is a type of relational property between certain physical objects and states, a relation between one or more people and an object, state or event. However, the researcher investigating these phenomena does not shape their meaning. Meanings are objectively existing phenomena in so far as they are properties of social reality that exist independently of what the researcher, or any other *single* person, thinks; they are collective phenomena. So statements about these phenomena are true or false, independently of what the researcher, or any other individual believes; thus, such *statements* are objective. Searle[2] coined this *epistemic*

[1] Physicists nowadays claim that they observe electrons, but obviously they mean that they observe electrons using highly advanced technology based on quantum mechanics. So the 'observation' is highly indirect.

[2] John Searle, (1932) American philosopher, professor at Berkeley.

objectivity. Another form of objectivity observed by Searle is the ontic; some *things* exist in subject's minds, others exist in the world and would continue to do so were there no minds at all. The former are *ontologically subjective*, the latter *ontologically objective*.

Statements about social meaning are epistemically objective. But social meaning could not exist without the existence of individual minds having intentions and beliefs. Should we then draw the conclusion that social meaning is ontologically subjective? Searle's answer is yes.[3]

Since propositions concerning these phenomena are objectively true or false, it is possible, in principle, to analyse them, and thus make objective statements about them. I write 'in principle' because it is sometimes impossible to know what someone who has long since been dead intended in regards to some action. Yet, it is clear that this person had *some* intention in regards to his or her action; hence, propositions concerning this intention are objectively true or false regardless of whether we can ever know them.

This conclusion is not generally accepted. From the fact that all the phenomena above are social constructions, some draw the conclusion that objective propositions regarding these phenomena are not possible. I shall discuss this counter-argument and the various interpretations of social constructions in Sect. 5.9.

Given this discussion of intentionality, it is now appropriate to investigate a couple of examples of qualitative methods that exemplify the general discussion surrounding intentionality and qualitative methods. These methods are hermeneutics and grounded theory.

5.3 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is often characterized as a tradition of research aimed at how one reaches an understanding of various phenomena, such as texts or historical events. According to a number of hermeneuticians, understanding requires empathy, the ability to place oneself in another person's situation. This is the central thesis of R. G. Collingwood,[4] see his (1994).

We often use the word 'understanding' in a different sense. We can, for example, ask someone if he understands Relativity Theory. In such a case, we cannot attain understanding through some hermeneutical process, but rather through describing the logical connections between concepts in the theory and how it is to be applied to concrete physical situations. Understanding in the hermeneutical sense is something else, viz., the understanding of the *meaning* of something that is bestowed with an intention, a human, a group of humans, or the product of human actions. To

[3] See Searle (1995), p. 12.

[4] Robert George Collingwood (1889–1943) British philosopher, historian and archeologist.

understand a human is thus to understand what he or she wants to express or achieve through his or her various actions, writings, or art.

Understanding in the second sense is attained through *interpretation*. Hermeneutics rightly stress that no interpretive process starts 'from scratch'. Rather, we always approach the unknown with some *preconceptions*. These may concern what counts as an explanation, how people typically think and act, and what linguistic or conceptual frameworks are applicable in the specific case. From these preconceptions we make a preliminary, and often crude, interpretation that forms a starting point for further studies. These further, more detailed, investigations can either strengthen our preliminary interpretation, or lead to their revision. Thus in the process of interpretation, one begins with an initial conception of the whole and then uses this to inform a more detailed study of the parts. This detailed study of the parts then serves to inform a reassessment of the whole, which then serves to inform a re-evaluation and deepening of the study of the parts, and so on. This shifting of focus from interpreting the whole to studying the various parts and back again is referred to as a hermeneutic circle. This circularity ceases when the process of interpretation attains a sufficient degree of coherence between the interpretation of the parts and the whole. (There are other formulations of the goal of a hermeneutic process, but I shall not discuss them here.)

Thus, the central activity of hermeneutical research is interpretation. But what is the link between interpretation and classification?

Firstly, the practicing hermeneutic must determine a limit as to the kinds of phenomena that have meaning. This is, in effect, a classification. Sometimes there are interesting borderline cases; one such is so-called hysterical diseases. Paralysis of the arm or leg without any apparent physiological cause was interpreted by Sigmund Freud[5] as a hysterical disorder. Freud considered this kind of illness as an unconscious reaction to conflicts with respect to some unbearable social situation. Since his patients were predominately upper class women, he believed these symptoms to be manifestations of an unconscious plea for attention. In 1900, upper class women in Vienna, where Freud lived, were constrained to a fixed way of life. Their only purpose consisted in producing heirs for their husbands and acting as decoration in social situations, which did not leave much room for personal goals and requirements. Thus, Freud heard a cry for help: care about me, I am important, I need to be taken seriously! A hysterical disease was thus a means to gain attention and, given that Freud treated such cases as phenomena with meaning, required interpretation. According to modern physiological studies, however, hysterical diseases are actually injuries in the motor-skill centre of the brain, which controls the function of the extremities. This would appear to refute Freud's theory, but is that true? Could it be that the very social situations in which the afflicted women found themselves were the causes of their brain injuries? This dispute touches upon the fundamental question as to whether or not these diseases have

[5] Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was an Austrian doctor, first active in Vienna, later in his life in London, who started psychoanalysis.

meaning; and thus also upon the question as to whether or not one should regard psychology as a human or natural science.

In my opinion, it seems that the question regarding whether to describe these states in terms of mental or physiological terms is purely a matter of appropriateness. Once we know more about such phenomena we will, I think, come to understand that they are merely two different ways of describing the same thing; mental phenomena are physical phenomena, although described in psychological terms. More about this in Chap. 12.

The first classification the hermeneutic makes is thus the determination of what can be the object of interpretation. However, the eventual process of interpretation is itself a sequence of classifications. Let us examine an example from Swedish history to illustrate this point. The document that established the so-called Kalmar union between Sweden, Denmark and Norway, written on July 20, 1397, contains a number of irregularities. First, it is not written on parchment, but on paper, which was highly unusual for important documents of the time. Furthermore, several seals of important persons are missing. Interestingly enough, it was only 7 days earlier, on July 13, 1397, that these persons had signed and attached their seals to the so-called coronation letter in favour of king Erik of Pomerania. Given these anomalies, the hermeneutic historian asks the following: are they historically significant, or are they purely circumstantial? Furthermore, if these anomalies are significant, then what do they signify? Should we interpret them as the silent protest of certain groups in Sweden and Norway against queen Margareta's claims to the throne (Erik was under-age after all), or as something else? There are a number of further classifications that remain to be made.

An important problem in connection with the hermeneutical method is the choice of criteria for accurate interpretation, which I shall discuss more generally in Sect. 5.8.

Without delving deeper into a discussion about hermeneutical methods, we can conclude that such methods involve classifications of meaningful material with respect to intentional categories.

5.4 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a tradition within sociology inspired by Symbolic Interactionism, whose ontological thesis is that social interaction is an exchange of meaningful symbols. In Grounded Theory, this thesis is applied to a strong, empirically oriented method. The starting point is a critique of the classical sociologists' (Marx, Weber, Durkheim) 'grand stories' for being too abstract and with little connection to empirical data. Glaser and Strauss (1967), the seminal work on Grounded theory, claim that any new theory should in contrast start from bottom and be generated on the grounds of empirical data. Once these data has been collected, they are treated using a method called *coding*, which results in a set of *categories*. The method could be described as consisting of four steps[6]:

[6] This description is adapted from Alvesson and Sköldberg (2008).

- Read the text (field notes, interviews or documents) word for word, row for row, or at least paragraph for paragraph.
- Always ask yourself, under which everyday, or otherwise common sense, categories does the data in the text fall?
- Continuously note down these categories and further data that fall under them.
- Inspect the data and categories in order to find possible further enriching properties.

This collection of bullet points may seem a bit vague to the outside observer, for one is compelled to ask what is meant by 'data', 'categories', and the properties thereof. It is obvious that we need concrete examples of this method in order get a clear picture of how it is supposed to work. However, one can perhaps make the following reflections without such examples.

1. There is a clear inductive attitude in the method, and it seems taken for granted that classification of data into categories arises naturally and without the aid of theories.
2. The method draws on Bacon's inductivism, in so far as classification is said to arise naturally via a detailed study of the empirical data. Bacon's inductivism has been criticized for theoretical naivety; the sorting of objects and phenomena into categories is at least partly an active process of the mind. This critique also pertains to Grounded Theory.
3. If one must use only those categories that are intelligible in advance, one runs the risk that research being able to produce trivial knowledge only, since new theories require new conceptualization.

Alvesson and Sköldberg (2008) share similar sentiments. After a discussion of an example of coding they write:

> The coding will, despite good intentions, not portray 'reality' unequivocally through an objective, unambiguous, secure and rational procedure. On the contrary, the researcher will, in light of his/her unconscious frames of reference, interpret what he/she sees in front of him/her. Two problems with an unconscious frame of reference is that one advocates that reference frame in the form of the bias that arises from common-sense classification, and that one places far too much energy on detailed coding.[7]

This is not the place for a critical investigation of the pros and cons of Grounded Theory, but one thing is abundantly clear. That is, a central point of this qualitative method is the classification of empirical data. Since Grounded Theory is a method for understanding the meaning that people give to various types of phenomena, this classification is done with respect to intentional categories.

Without any further discussion of other qualitative methods, I am prepared to make the generalization that my definition of them is correct; namely, all the methods that are normally called qualitative are captured by two defining criteria: they are classifications, and that the resulting categories are intentional.

[7] op.cit p. 84.

5.5 The Intentionality of Observations

According to certain methods of research, e.g. Grounded Theory and Ethnomethodology, one is supposed to passively observe the object of research and then theorize about what one has experienced. As a general methodology, this is naïve. Observation is an active mental process. It is intentional, directed towards certain features of the perceptual field, as well as some features that are more or less unconscious. With every blink of the eye, our sense organs are flooded with impulses, and the brain's first task is to sort out most of them so that we can focus our attention. (There are tragic examples of people that, more or less, lack this selectiveness; they register all impressions but are unable to sort them regarding salience and to use them for any purpose.) The question arises, 'Of all the impressions our sense organs take in, what is sorted out, and on what grounds is this done? How do our intentions govern our perceptions? All we presently know about the answer to these questions is that it can probably be given a general description in evolutionary terms. The ability to direct one's attention toward features in the environment relevant for survival and reproduction is a consequence of natural selection. Of course, we humans often direct our attention towards things other than those required for survival, but the important point is that at some time we developed a nervous system that has the ability of focusing our attention on a great variety of things. It is correct that observation is governed by the observer's cultural frames of reference, but it is based on this fundamentally biological aspect of observation, viz., that it is selective and goal-directed.

This gives strong empirical evidence for the assumption that we are unable to observe without any presupposed concepts, or rather, observation by its nature is application of concepts.[8] This does not mean that one is in possession of articulate hypotheses about possible observations, nor that we should not endeavour to rid ourselves of prejudice and expectation to the maximum extent possible. Furthermore, it does not mean that initial data has no role to play in guiding test hypothesis choice; initial preconceptions and test-hypotheses, though related, are distinct entities.

In the previous chapter observation was analysed as a three-step process; (i) to acquire phenomenal experiences; (ii) to synthesize these experiences into an object; and (iii) to recognize this object as an object of a specific kind. The second step in this process introduces the directedness of the act of perception, that perception by its nature is object-directed. This directedness encompasses the ability to focus one's attention on an object in the field of perception, and to distinguish it from the rest.

The object-directedness of perception is rather obvious when we think of visual perception, but perhaps less so when we consider our other senses. However, this is

[8] This conclusion is similar to Kant's view, expressed as 'intuition without concepts is blind'. (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A51, B75).

mainly due to the fact that we naturally think of visual objects, bodies and pictures, when we read the word 'object'. If we generalize and remember that the word 'object' as used in philosophical discourse means whatever can be talked about and thus subject to predication, we may appreciate that for example hearing also is object-directed. We hear objects such as other persons' voices, musical themes, and all kinds of recognizable sounds. In addition, we are all acquainted with the phenomenon that we might hear something without listening to it. This is the difference between having a phenomenal experience of sound and having an audial perception.

In the previous discussion of Grounded Theory, an instruction was quoted advocating the reading of a text word-by-word, line-by-line, and so forth. This attention to detail may seem trivial, but it is not the physical aspects of the text one should focus on. Rather, one should focus on the text in a way that regards it as a linguistic entity with syntax and semantics, as well as the pragmatic aspects of the author's intentions, when they are relevant. However, how does one know if they are relevant? Again, we need a preliminary theory, which can be as simple as a gut feeling, or a purely physiologically based preconception inherent in the conscious act of perception. Thus, observation is not entirely unbiased.

In summary, the process of observation is the transformation of a collection of qualitative aspects of experience into objects. These objects can often be recognized as objects of a specific type (cats, cars, events, etc.), and once we have reached this third step in the observation process, we are mature enough to formulate any number of observational statements.

The central philosophical question in this discussion is whether one can say that the perception of an object is entirely theory-neutral or not. Personally, I am inclined to answer that the perception of a physical object is, in most cases, the same process for all people regardless of cultural or theoretical predispositions. The main argument is based on observations of language learning, both in the case of the children's learning its native language and of anthropologist's learning the language of native cultures. An extreme example is learning the language of some tribe in the Amazonas or in Papua New Guinea. Some of these tribes still live as gathers-hunters with almost no contact with western civilisation. Despite great cultural differences and without any previous knowledge about their beliefs, anthropologists are able to learn their language and to communicate with them. How could that process begin? It seems utterly plausible that one must do the same as when one learn small children the first words; one begins with words for physical objects in the immediate surrounding, point to them and say the word and encourage by gestures the other to say something in his language. If you want to know the natives word for fish, you may point to some fishes and say 'fish' and encourage the other to say a word in his language. Perhaps he has no general term corresponding to 'fish' but only for different species of fish; but that will sooner or later be discovered by

the anthropologist. This would not work if not both parties discerned the same physical objects in their surroundings.[9]

In the previous chapter I suggested that if there is doubt about whether a given observation has been made, it is always possible to make use of more primitive formulations in the verbal expression of that observation. It is always possible to derive a sufficiently primitive observational statement such that two researchers can agree to it, no matter how much their theoretical backgrounds differ. This applies just as well to qualitative research. For, in many cases it is easy to agree as to the words contained in a text, or – for that matter – what the text says, even if one disagrees about how this information should be interpreted. There are hardly any theory-independent observations, in an absolute sense, if by the word 'observation' we mean the aforementioned three-step process. However, theoretical disagreement at the third level does not entail disagreement at the lower level of observation.

When we study raw data, or make observations, we formulate observational statements. Every such statement is a declarative sentence. Declarative sentences are comprised of an individual term and a predicate (see Appendix). The individual term refers to the observed object, which can be a physical object, a person, an act, a smell or a text, anything that can be identified and re-identified as *the same thing*. The predicate, on the other hand, is a general term that describes a property that several objects may have, or a relation between objects. The result of an observation is thus the claim that the observed object satisfies a certain predicate. This corresponds to the third step, the recognition of an object. The application of a predicate to an object is thus a classification, since one is sorting that object into the first of the two categories (i) those that satisfies the predicate, and (ii) those that do not. In other words, observational statements are the result of classifications. The interesting question is now: Are these classifications correct, informative, interesting or useful?

The French cultural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) observed that all humans, scientists and 'primitive peoples' alike, classify. The difference between the two is the choice of categories. The quotation from Lévi-Strauss at the beginning of this chapter, 'We classify as we can. But we do classify', expresses precisely this point. The difference between 'modern' scientific thinkers and so called primitive people is not that the former make classifications of phenomena that the latter are unable to make, but that one makes classifications according to different criteria. Doing science is to categorize phenomena in a more useful and considered way.

Are the scientific classifications more correct than those made by Amazonian natives (Lévi-Strauss' specific field of research)? Classifications of plague and volcanic eruptions as expressions of the will of the Gods seem 'primitive' to us and thus incorrect. But is it not likely that 'primitive' peoples would reject our

[9] Quine argued in his (1960) that one cannot determine which ontology the native has only by agreeing on translation of complete sentences. So the native may not after all, view the visible world as inhabited by physical objects. His argument is in my view convincing as far as it goes, but there are other reasons to think that all humans cognize the visible world as inhabited among other things, by physical objects.

scientific explanations of plague as a disease caused by transmittable microorganisms, or volcanic eruptions as caused by movement of the tectonic plates, as irrational and much more speculative than assuming gods. Is there any objective criterion for ranking these two archetypical explanations?

The answer is that the best theory is the one that helps us predict the occurrence of the phenomena in question, thus enabling us to take preventative action. We want to prevent plagues and disasters, or at least be able to reliably predict when they will occur, a goal on which most people, of all cultures, could agree. If we take measures to prevent some disaster using a false theory, there is a chance that doing so will make the situation even worse. A tragic example of this is the 'black death' of the fourteenth century, when people would seek shelter in churches and beg God for mercy. In the crowded quarters of a church, the plague spread more easily.

Modern science has shown itself to be superior in this way, to other modes of thinking in many respects. However, this does not mean that all scientific theories are correct, only that science in general is on the right path. To make scientific classifications, in contrast to primitive ones, means making better predictions, but is no guarantee for truth.

5.6 Are Quantitative Methods Better than Qualitative?

It is sometimes claimed that mature science is quantitative, and thus the proper model for all scientific endeavours. It seems doubtful, however, whether such a claim could be defended. It is certainly a big step forward to have made one's concepts precise enough so that quantitative comparisons are possible. A simple example is the substitution of the quantitative concept '. . .higher temperature than' for the qualitative concept '. . .hotter than'. However, is this precision always desirable? Take, for example, a concept like *degree of democracy*. It is certainly of relevance in political science. Can such a concept as *democracy* be reasonably quantified in an uncontroversial way? I do not think so. Democracy contains many different factors, such as fair elections between various candidates, freedom of speech, protection of minorities, etc. A few of these factors may allow for quantification, but how shall they be weighed against each other? Can a low quantity of one factor be compensated by a high quantity of another? Perhaps it is more reasonable to require a certain minimal standard for all those factors that are necessary for democracy. Yet, all this allows us to do is to categorise systems of government into the democratic and non-democratic categories, or at best perform a ranking. It does not allow us to compare degrees of democracy in a quantitative scale.

It seems reasonable to say that *degree of democracy* is not a quantity, but rather a multi-dimensional qualitative measure based primarily on judgment. Assigning numerals to the relevant categories and then deciding the relative weights of each category may quantify this judgment. However, there is no objective basis for how these relative weights are chosen.

The conclusion is that it is not reasonable to say that all scientific disciplines should strive for quantitative methods. The use of qualitative methods does not make for a lesser or inferior science. In fact, there a many interesting scientific questions that are discussed on the basis of qualitative data. This conclusion should not, however, be taken as an argument for ridding certain sciences of their quantitative methods. For every qualitative concept, one ought to ask: Is there an objective way of replacing the concept in question with a quantitative one? Is there a point in doing so? During certain periods the debate in such disciplines as sociology and pedagogy has revolved around this question. Many so-called positivists have claimed that a requirement for proper science is that one must be able to quantify observations in an objective way, whereas critics have claimed that attempts to quantify what is essentially qualitative in nature leads to a loss of the core of this data; namely, its intentional aspects. According to my grasp of the situation, one cannot take a general stance regarding this question; rather, in every concrete situation one must ask oneself what kind of question – quantitative or qualitative – one is trying to answer. One must first have put forth a hypothesis before one can decide what kind of investigation is to be done. Thus, the debate between positivists and anti-positivists should be reformulated as a debate about which questions and hypotheses are we interested in answering.

The positivist would then claim that qualitative hypotheses do not allow for objective testing, since all qualitative data is based on judgments, which are subjective in nature. Therefore, according to the positivist, only quantitative questions are worth researching. The anti-positivist would beg to differ. Hence, the central issue in the debate between the two is objectivity.

5.7 Objectivity and the Use of Qualitative Methods

There is a general reluctance to apply qualitative methods because of their ostensible uncertainty. This uncertainty has nothing to do with classification as such, but with its intentional aspects. No one has ever argued against the determination of blood type because it is a qualitative method (given that qualitative method is interpreted as plain classification), since the method of testing is extremely reliable. The uncertainty of qualitative methods lies not in that they classify using nominal or ordinal scales; rather it lies in the search for the correct *meaning* of the phenomena in question. A condition for claiming that qualitative statements are objectively true or false is that the object involved exists in reality, and does so independently of observation. Thus we have come to the central ontological question: Does this meaning, which is the goal of all qualitative research, have an independent existence?

If one claims that all that exists are physical things in space and time, then it immediately follows that the phenomenon in question (the meaning of something) does not exist, since it is supposed to be a non-physical entity. However, this premise expresses an extreme point of view, and few share it. Even a strict

physicalist like Quine accepts that there are non-physical things such as numbers, sets and other mathematical entities. But he would not agree that there are entities that are defined in intentional terms, since he thinks that we have no clear criteria of identity for such things. There are multiple arguments for this point of view, such as the following. In order to claim that a certain abstract entity (e.g. the meaning of a sentence) exists, one must be able to distinguish between the entity and its description or name. It follows that one must be able to determine whether two different descriptions describe the *same* entity, or different entities. To do this, one must have criteria for the identity of such entities. Quine's view is that it is impossible to formulate criteria for the identity of intentional entities, and he draws the conclusion that such concepts should be kept out of science proper. This view is highly controversial, and few have fully supported it, even though the requirement of identity criteria is reasonable.

As I have previously claimed, I think that meanings exist objectively, and can be researched in the same manner as physical things. Yet, this claim was made without offering an explicit example of the, admittedly indispensible, criteria for the identity of intentional entities. Unfortunately, such a discussion would be well beyond the scope of this book.

Objectivity in the humanities and social sciences has been debated from other points of view. Some have claimed that social phenomena are *social constructions*, and that these do not objectively exist. The conclusion that many draw is that the requirement of objectivity should therefore be abandoned. John Searle attacks this view in his book *The Construction of Social Reality*. Searle introduces the concept of *social facts* to emphasize the external and objective character of social phenomena. These concepts, *social construction* and *social fact*, rightly deserve their own section.

5.8 Searle on Brute and Social Facts

Searle's most important distinction, in his (1995), is between *brute facts* and *social facts*. A brute fact is a fact whose existence does not depend on human thoughts, attitudes or knowledge, whereas the existence of social facts does depend on these things. An example of a brute fact is the fact that Mount Everest is 8,848 m high. Notice that it is not the statement itself but its content that constitutes the fact. This brute fact – the height of Mount Everest – does not depend on whether or not humans have measured it, nor does it depend on which sentence we choose for its expression; for instance the same fact can be expressed as 'Mount Everest is 29,493 feet high'. This is a different sentence; but it states the *same* fact. Of course, we cannot *speak* about this fact without applying certain concepts and having knowledge, yet the fact would hold even if no human had ever existed. The statement is true (or perhaps false, if we have measured incorrectly), irrespective of our knowledge about the height of Mount Everest. Thus, that Mount Everest is 8,848 m high is a brute fact.

Certain other facts, on the other hand, do essentially depend upon people's perceptions. Suppose that you are watching a football[10] match on television. It is assumed that you believe it a fact that what you are watching is a football match that is either being played now, or has been played in the past in the case that the feed is not live. This football match is obviously dependent upon the existence of humans. However, it is not enough that there exist 22 players and a ball. There must exist referees, linesmen, spectators and many others that must *agree* that there is a football match going on in order for it to be a football match. If enough people think that it is not a football match, then it is not a football match, even though the movements of the players are precisely the same. The remarkable thing about this type of fact is that it seems to depend wholly on what the people involved *think* about it. Searle introduced the concept of a *collective intention* in order to draw attention to this joint comprehension. If many people are focused on the same object, activity, or event, then we can talk about their *collective intention*.

Searle calls facts that are constituted by collective intentions *social facts*. Of these social facts, the most interesting subcategory is that of *institutional facts*.[11] Searle's prime example of an institutional fact is the fact that certain objects and states of affairs are considered to be money, as discussed in Sect. 5.2. If there were no collective intentions to treat certain objects as money, then these objects would not be money.

The structure of institutional facts is thus that something, X, counts as something else, Y, under certain circumstances: This is a constitutive rule,[12] which we can use as an implicit definition of institutional facts:

X counts as Y in contexts C.

Where the expression 'counts as' expresses a collective intention; the collective intention imposes a certain status, Y, on things previously identified as X. It is this imposition of status that creates the institutional fact.

The basis for such constructions could also in turn be institutional facts. One immediately asks if there must be an ultimate basis, a bottom of brute facts that are not so constructed. Searle's answer is yes, there must be some objects that are not constructed; brute facts are ontologically prior to institutional facts. Institutional facts ultimately depend on brute facts.

Other examples of social facts are 'Kim Philby was a Soviet spy', 'Sweden is a member of the E.U.', and 'John Doe owns shares of Google stock'.

[10] Like all Europeans, by 'football' I do not refer to american football, but to soccer.

[11] According to Searle, examples of social facts that are not institutional facts are collective actions that do not require use of language; for example, the coordinated hunting of wolves'.

[12] Searle uses here the distinction between regulative and constitutive rules. A regulative rule regulates activities, which occur independently of the rule; for example, traffic rules. Constitutive rules, by contrast, constitute the activity, which comes into existence by the implementation of these rules. The rules of chess are a good example; if you are not moving the pieces mainly according to the rules, you are not playing chess.

It is an institutional fact that Sweden is a member of the E.U., since Sweden's membership depends on the attitudes of many people and these attitudes confer a certain status to the kingdom of Sweden. Assume that all humans in Europe and the E.U. suddenly decided that Sweden is not a member of the E.U. Sweden's representatives would not participate in the E.U.'s meetings, customs would not apply E.U. regulations as regards the transport of goods between Sweden and E.U. countries and the E.U. countries would not ask the Swedish government's opinion on internal E.U. matters. In short, everyone would act as if Sweden was not part of the E.U. An expert in international law would perhaps say that Sweden still has the proper documentation stating that it is a member of the E.U., but recall that the premise was that everyone believes that Sweden is no longer in the E.U., even legal experts. That is to say, if no one in the E.U. recognizes these documents, then in all practicality, Sweden is not a member of the E.U. On the other hand, it makes no difference if all documents regarding Sweden's membership are destroyed. For its membership is a social and institutional fact; it consists of the opinions and actions of a large number of people. If all of these people, or the relevant part of them, were to change their minds, then this social and institutional fact would also change.[13]

Would the fact remain unchanged if only some of the people involved, but not all, changed their minds regarding Sweden's membership in the E.U.? Suppose that Sweden's government was of the opinion that Sweden was still an E.U. member, but the French government was not. In such a case, it seems that the matter would be decided in meetings between the heads of both governments, and if not, then at the E.U. court. Sooner or later, the matter would be cleared up.

This discussion concerns the question whether or not a certain fact is the case; that is, how one should characterize the relevant group of people. As far as I can see, there is no general answer to this question, since the context determines what counts as the relevant group. The discussion does not concern the question whether or not an alleged fact is social or brute, but whether it is a fact at all. It is not uncommon for one to be unsure as to whether or not an alleged social fact obtains. This uncertainty applies to brute facts as well. After all, is Mount Everest actually 8,848 m high? Maybe its height was inaccurately measured.

Human beliefs are subjective; therefore one is tempted to say that the social fact that Sweden is an E.U. member is also subjective. However, this conclusion is incorrect. A social fact is essentially a state of affairs that many people consider to be the case and act in accordance with. What many people are in agreement over is objective in a certain sense, namely, *intersubjective*. One must remember that 'objectivity' can have more than one sense, and that one of the most common and important is intersubjectivity.

[13] The written constitution of Soviet Union fulfilled high demands on democracy, but in practice the secretary-general of the communist party was dictator and all kinds of opposition to the communist system was promptly and severely punished. The document meant nothing. On the other hand, the constitution of UK is to a great extent not written; yet one may say that democratic procedures are strictly upheld by all involved.

That many people are required to establish a social fact immediately raises the question, how many? And further, if the number is not important, then what kinds of people are required? Suppose that two people marry in secrecy at a Swedish embassy. The only ones who know of the event are the two married people, the officiator and two witnesses. Nevertheless, it is a social fact that this couple is married, since the officiator was empowered, under certain conditions, to marry the couple. In this case, one can say that the social fact that these two people are married is established indirectly by collective agreement. We consider all people, regardless of whether or not we know them, to be married, if they acted within the conditions set by law.

There are interesting borderline cases where it is unclear which social fact is the case. A typical example concerns the power of a government during a revolution. Prior to the revolution, there are a number of social facts such as that the country has a government. During the revolutionary process, the established structure of power is dissolved, and after a while it is unclear what is the case. The remnants of the old government try to re-establish their position of power using propaganda and force, while the revolutionaries attempt to get rid of them, by force and other means. There is no obvious line to be drawn between the fact that the country has a government that is exercising its power and the fact that the old government and its power are no more.

The abundance of such borderline cases has prompted some people to abandon the concept of a social fact altogether. This is an unreasonable view. Many fruitful concepts are somewhat unclear and have many borderline cases. One such example is life. No one would doubt the fact that there are living things, and similarly that there are dead things. Nevertheless, it is difficult to draw a line in certain cases. For example, is a virus a living thing? Another borderline case is prions, i.e., proteins that are considered a likely cause of mad cow disease. Are prions living things, despite the fact that they lack DNA?

That there are many cases in which we cannot determine whether or not an alleged social fact is the case, does not mean that the distinction between brute facts and social facts is unclear. Rather, it is a consequence of the variable nature of social facts. Like all other changing things, many social facts come into being and vanish gradually, so the matter of their existence is sometimes unclear.

In discussing the difference between subjectivity and objectivity, one sometimes tends to forget that the line between them is drawn differently when dealing with natural phenomena as opposed to social phenomena. In the case of natural phenomena, a belief can be objectively false even though everyone shares it. It is objectively false if this belief does not agree with reality. But in the case of social facts, those facts are just collective beliefs and intentions. Therefore, the line between subjective and objective, with respect to social facts, is drawn between what one person believes and what many believe. A single person's belief about a social fact is subjective, but the common belief of many people is not. Rather, it is an objective fact about which a single person can be mistaken. This mistake is in regards to other people's attitudes, and is objective in the same sense as a mistake about a brute fact.

Knowledge about social facts is acquired by studying people's beliefs and the actions they perform in accordance with those beliefs. Naturally, this requires that we must interpret people's statements, actions and artefacts. There is simply nothing else to study. It could be thought that the result of beliefs and actions, e.g. written expressions, exist in a physical sense; and therefore, that we do not need to interpret anything, since it is sufficient merely to read the physically existing document. However, we cannot escape the problem of interpretation when a written expression is to be used in a concrete situation. Thus, knowledge about social facts is acquired through the interpretation of what people say, do or write.

5.9 Social Constructions

The term 'social fact' is not common in discussions of social scientific method and ontology. Instead, one often talks about *social constructions* (e.g. money, childhood, and in one book, reality[14]). What does this mean? As the term is normally used, it does not seem to have a single meaning. I shall give three interpretations.

(i) With the term 'social construction' one sometimes wants to emphasize that the phenomenon in question are created by a cooperative group of people. Given that one accepts that not everything is socially constructed, the term seems to have been introduced to mark a distinction similar to the one Searle makes between brute and social facts. However, some claim that everything is socially constructed, which yields a different interpretation of the term.

(ii) Sometimes people want to reject a statement as not truth-apt, with the argument that it is about a social construction. This argument presupposes that social constructions are not real. This can be interpreted as claiming that only physical objects and properties exist objectively. In my opinion, this view is incorrect. Propositions about constructed things, physical artefacts or social constructions, are just as true or false as propositions about non-constructed things.

(iii) Among those who use the concept, there is an implicit, and at times explicit, critique of the maxim that true sentences represent parts of reality. The distinction between reality and the linguistic representation thereof is refuted as untenable; thus making 'reality' a linguistic and therefore social construction. For example, one may hear the expression that people live in different realities, and that there is no observer-independent reality. An interesting confusion seems to be lingering here; for researchers and other people whose attention is directed towards natural phenomena normally use the word 'reality' to talk about the world regardless of how we perceive it. However, researchers in the humanities and social sciences often use a

[14] Berger, & Luckmann. *The social construction of reality*. New York: Anchor Books.

> phenomenological interpretation of 'reality' along the lines of 'reality as it appears to someone'. Since our perceptions and theories regarding the world seem to be at least partially culturally dependent, it seems fair to say that reality (in this sense) is a social construction. However, Searle's point is, and I wholeheartedly agree, that even these constructions are real phenomena. They are embodied in humans (or in properties of humans) and can be articulated. Thus, one can talk about them, hypothesize about them, and make true or false propositions about them. In short, physical entities are not the only real entities.

Suppose that the constructivists persevere and argue that the claim presented above – that one could make objectively true or false statements about how people perceive the world – is also a social construction. This would mean that one cannot claim that a proposition is true in any other sense than that it is true for the person stating it; that is, 'true' means 'true for me'. Such a view is entirely relativistic and a modern parallel to the sophist Protagoras' view that everything is as it appears to the speaker. This view was previously discussed in Sect. 2.3.1, where it was rejected via Plato's counter-argument showing that relativism is self-contradictory.

If we assume that reality is a social construction, then we are want to ask, 'constructed from what?' According to Searle's analysis of social facts, we are to understand these constructions as attributions of certain functions/statuses to objects or actions. The objects to which we attribute a certain function can in turn also be social constructions. Thus arises the question: Of what is this object a construction? Apparently, we are left with an infinite regress, if we do not accept that there are things that are not constructed. Searle's discussion concerns social facts, but the same reasoning can be used in regards to social constructions. If the concept of social construction is to have any intelligible meaning, then there must exist things that are not social constructions.

In summary, I should say that – under certain interpretations – the concept of social construction seems to coincide with Searle's concept of social facts. In these interpretations, there are no problems with objectivity. However, if one attempts to develop a subjectivist or epistemological relativist view by claiming that everything is socially constructed, it is possible to refute this view in the same way that Plato refuted Protagoras' total relativism.

5.10 Criteria for Correct Interpretations

There does not seem to be a *general* criterion for correct interpretation. However, in some cases, like the example of Sweden's E.U. membership, it can be argued that *coherence* in the interpretation of all pertinent documents is the ultimate criterion. The interpretation of central clauses in these documents must lead to unanimity.

However, this does not exclude the possibility of conflicting coherent interpretations. This is a logical possibility, which in practice can be sidestepped given that

one treats interpretation as an on-going process. Suppose someone were to propose a divergent interpretation of the meaning of Sweden's agreements with the E.U., and further claimed that this interpretation is coherent given that one reinterprets all other contracts regarding international cooperation etc. One could then argue that this interpretation is incorrect, since it breaks with the historical continuity of the interpretation of such contracts and other legal documents. Thus, the historical continuity of human and state relations becomes the distinguishing factor regarding different coherent, and yet conflicting interpretations. However, this does not solve the problem, since a revisionist interpretation of a text can certainly contain interpretations of earlier interpretations of that text. Thus, what is required is consistent revision. In the end, whether a certain interpretation of a text is correct will be decided by referendum, negotiation or by force. A good example illustrating this point is the Swedish judicial system, in which the Supreme Court has been mandated to interpret laws and the concepts applied therein. (It is the same in many other countries.) Thus some laws, or parts of laws, are construed by the interpretations made by the Supreme Court.

Another way of expressing this point is that the ultimate criterion for correct interpretation is determined by how all people involved comprehend their social relations. The coherence requirement therefore, in this case, translates to the requirement that the interpretation is accepted by (almost) all actors involved. This criterion is called the *actor's criterion*.

It is, however, not always the actor's, or actors', own comprehension that determines the ultimate criterion. Take, for example, one of Shakespeare's plays. When the play is to be performed at the theatre, the director must interpret the text in order to determine the point of the play. If we were to require the actor's criterion in such a case, then the author's intentions would be indicative of whether the director correctly interpreted the play. Of course, it is not necessary that director interpret the play exactly as Shakespeare intended. Thus, one cannot claim that the director misinterprets the play. However, this does not lead to any sort of relativism. The question 'what is the point of Shakespeare's play' has a definite answer (even if we can never know what it is), and the question 'what is the point of the director's version' may have a different definite answer. Naturally, the audience need not accept Shakespeare's nor the director's interpretation. For, the concrete performance of the play can be interpreted in a number of other ways.

The lack of a generally applicable criterion for correct interpretation is due, in part, to the large variety of uses one may have for a given interpretation, and partly to what Quine calls the *indeterminacy of translation*. It should be carefully noted that Quine's thesis about indeterminacy of translation is not the epistemological point that it is impossible to know the correct translation, but the more profound point that there are no facts of the matter determining correctness of translation. Quine has claimed, and many have agreed, that it is possible to produce multiple mutually exclusive translations of the same text, and nothing determines which is the correct one.

5.11 Summary

Qualitative methods are ultimately methods for making classifications of meaningful phenomena. When these classifications concern individuals, groups or institutions the resulting categories are interpretations of human actions and the artefacts produced by those actions. The question about the objectivity of these classifications is thus the question about the objectivity of interpretation.

Those who claim that all interpretation is subjective and that there are no objective facts in the human and social sciences have implicitly assumed that the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity is construed in the same way in all disciplines. This view is based on a confusion of two different meanings of objective and subjective. One can use the objective/subjective distinction to mark an ontological difference; certain phenomena are subjective in the ontological sense, if they are contained in, or part of, an individual's consciousness, otherwise they are objective. But we also use the objective/subjective distinction to distinguish between different types of propositions. A proposition is objective if it is true or false independent of what the speaker believes to be the case, otherwise it is subjective. Individual's mental states are ontologically subjective, but propositions *about* these subjective things are objective in the epistemological sense. A proposition is epistemologically objective if it is possible to establish criteria for the truth or falsity of that proposition and if different people's application of those criteria yield the same result.

Discussion Questions

1. A central concept in Economics is utility. The everyday word 'utility' seems to defy measurement, but Economics is predominately a quantitative discipline. Discuss what conditions are required to be able to quantify utility and whether these conditions are normally fulfilled.
2. A common view in Ethics is called utilitarianism, according to which we ought to choose the action that, in the long run, provides maximum happiness to as many people as possible. In order to realize such an ethical stance, one must be able to compare different states of happiness. Discuss the possibilities of both intrapersonal and interpersonal comparisons of states of happiness.

Further Reading

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