Are case studies more than sophisticated storytelling?: Methodological problems of qualitative empirical research mainly based on semi-structured interviews

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Abstract Qualitative empirical research and case studies have, like any other scientific method, their strengths and weaknesses. But how valid are the findings stemming from such research, particularly when they are base on data gained from interviews? This paper primarily deals with the methodological problems throughout the whole research process. Areas of concerns are: (1) before collecting data and during the whole research process, (2) the process of collecting data, (3) internal validity and making sense of data, (4) external validity of the data and findings, (5) relation between the findings and social sciences as well as social practice. The analysis will reveal a mixed picture concerning the scientific value of qualitative case studies. There is some good news. There is more methodological freedom and room for creativity in qualitative research than it seems at first glance. On the other hand there is a need for a greater methodological awareness particularly concerning possible downsides of subjectivity, the generalisation of the findings, conscious and unconscious biases, influences of dominant ideologies and mainstream thinking. Above all, there is a great need for rational critique. There is great need for a more critical attitude towards (basic) assumptions—particularly, to challenge, question and criticise literally everything systematically and permanently and to put the findings sufficiently in relation to the wider historical context, i.e. epochal ideologies and societal structures. Social science research has to contribute much more to the discussion of values, interests, and ideologies that shape current and future social practices.

Keywords Qualitative empirical research · Case study · Interview · Methodology · Validity

1 Introduction

Even if one is sympathetic towards the value of qualitative empirical research and case studies they often can be criticised from a methodological perspective (for example, Deem 2001,
Major areas of concerns are the influence of the researcher on the research design, weaknesses and limits of methods and theories, the selection of units of investigation, interviewees and other data sources, the sufficiency and reliability of the sources of information, internal validity (truthfulness of the data), selection and grouping, interpretation and presentation of data, external validity (generalisation of the findings), testing of theory, as well as the relation between social sciences and social practice. Such issues raise serious questions about the scientific value of case studies and scientific reasoning based on qualitative empirical research.

In this paper the methodological problems and requirements of qualitative empirical research shall be investigated. It will be discussed whether qualitative case studies meet scientific standards, whether they can contribute anything at all to the progress of social sciences, or whether are they nothing else but more or less interesting stories (or fairytales) we are told. For this, the methodological limits, strengths and weaknesses of qualitative case studies shall be identified and discussed systematically.

In the second section it will be looked at areas of concern before collecting data and which are relevant throughout the whole research process (researcher, research design, use of methods and theories). In the third section we will look at the process of collecting data, followed by a fourth section on the internal validity and making sense of data (selection, grouping, interpretation, presentation). The fifth section concentrates on the external validity (formulation of theory), the sixth section on the relation between theory and practice. The final section provides a summary and some conclusions.

2 Research design, issues before collecting data and throughout the whole research process

I ‘A researcher’s theoretical position, interests, and political perspective will affect, if not determine, the research question and the methodological approach’

It is a common, and perhaps one of the most fundamental criticisms of qualitative research that the entire qualitative research process is biased by implicit assumptions, interests, world-views, prejudices, and one-sightedness of the researcher (Collins 1992, p. 182).

So what?, one might want to ask. That researcher have their own subjective views is, of course, also true for science and quantitative research—although less addressed and more hidden (Pyett 2003, p. 1172). Particularly positivistic theories and models, formulas and diagrams imply an objectivity and truthfulness that are simply not the case. For example, Wainwright (1997) drew the attention to the fact that random sampling and statistical testing ‘are not immune to manipulation by an unscrupulous researcher.’ Science in general is a human endeavour and one cannot have ideas, assumptions, theories, and formulas without the human factor. Patton (1990, p. 372 cited in Pyett 2003, p. 1172) came to the conclusion that “the human factor is the great strength and the fundamental weakness of qualitative inquiry and analysis”. Creativity and invention, science and social science are not possible without subjectivity.

1 Of course, ‘real’ research does not happen in such a linear way. Its chronological order is more of a cyclical process of interrelated steps that happen in parallel and repeatedly, often interlapping with, and influencing each other. Only for the sake of providing a systematic overview the whole research process is investigated in a logical and neatly differentiated order.

2 Hertz (1997, cited in: Pyett 2003, p. 1172). That they also influence, beside others, the analysis and interpretation of data will be shown in section 4.4.
Nonetheless, it is true that qualitative research and social sciences are more vulnerable to the possible downsides of subjectivity that may influence the research negatively. This is mainly due to the fact that social sciences cope with issues that are close to the researcher’s own experiences and daily life. At least theoretically, often practically and emotionally, the researcher is somehow touched by the issues he or she investigates. Researchers are humans. And even if one is not an enthusiastic proponent of certain ideas but more ‘a neutral observer’, nonetheless he or she usually has an opinion not only about what they investigate but also how these things should be. In this sense, intellectual rigor goes together with personal convictions like in any other profession. In qualitative research one can only draw analytical but not practical lines between research and researcher, ‘reality’ and making sense of it, data and their interpretation, social science and social practice. The question, therefore, is not how to exclude the human factor in research but how to cope with the possible downsides of subjectivity. The researcher can contribute a large part to coping with that problem mainly by making one’s own (implicit) assumptions, interests, and objectives concerning the research and social practice as explicit as possible and to acknowledge, where relevant, one’s own philosophical and political perspectives (Pyett 2003, p. 1171).

II There is no precise research question from the beginning, it probably will be redefined or changed during the research process

Another complaint concerning research using qualitative methods is the widespread practice of redefining the original research problem, question, and/or hypotheses during the research process (Maso 1989, p. 162). From a quantitative research perspective this can be catastrophe. Changing a survey question or hypothesis of a large scale experiment means that all data gathered so far might be useless.

From a qualitative research perspective, however, changing the research question might be seen differently. Qualitative research is explorative. Quite often neither the sites and units of investigation, nor the precise objects of reasoning, circumstances and core problems are really known at the beginning of the endeavour. Of course, researchers do have some questions in mind when they begin their qualitative investigation. But what to ask exactly often becomes clear(er) only after a while of investigating. Often new questions emerge during and because of the investigation. In other words: You only know the (right) questions when you already know what you are looking for. In this sense, the (re-)formulation of the research question (or adding new ones) is a sign for progress, for an increasingly better and deeper knowledge and understanding of the objects of reasoning and recognition of emerging patterns. Qualitative researchers should felt encouraged to ask themselves throughout the whole research process whether they ask the right questions, to change these whenever it seems appropriate, to challenge their even most basic assumptions and to see ‘things’ from as many different perspectives as possible.

III There are no precise qualitative scientific methods to investigate the research question

For investigating the research question(s) one needs tools, i.e. methods, theories and models. There is definitely no lack of such tools for qualitative research, e.g. grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), action research (e.g. Blichfeldt and Andersen 2006; MacPherson et al. 2000, pp. 51, 54; Eden and Huxham 1996, p. 76), inductivism, heuristic, hermeneutics, phenomenology, ethnography, interpretivist/constructivist and critical approaches, several types of ‘realism’, narrative analysis, naturalistic, emergent, and discourse analysis (Caelli et al. 2003, p. 3; Angen 2000, pp. 379, 382). Nonetheless, perhaps exactly because of that
amount of different methods there is some criticism that qualitative research is not based on precise methods and/or ‘method slurring’ and that both may “contribute to lack of rigor” (Whittemore et al. 2001, p. 525).

Such criticism mainly stems from a positivistic understanding of research. According to this notion a method has to be reliable in the sense that—ceteris paribus—it will always lead to the same results. This might be achievable in idealistic models or deliberately constructed laboratory experiments but not in real world investigations. Because of the complexity of intervening factors and the unpredictability of the objects of reasoning (human beings and social issues) approaches and methods for qualitative research can only be comparatively general guides but not algorithms aiming at an exact outcome (Karami et al. 2006).

However, the criticism might be justified in a different sense. The approaches and methods mentioned above are well elaborated and described quite precisely. Take grounded theory for example. But how many of those case studies claiming that their findings and conclusions are based on grounded theory, for example formulating categories, properties and hypothesis on the basis of the data found? It seems that quite often it is not so much the methods themselves but more the way they were used (or simply referred to) that raises concerns. There, therefore, seems to be a certain necessity to equip qualitative empirical research not only with the usual references to methods, but to take methodological issues more seriously into account (Anastas 2004, pp. 59–64).

IV Investigative case studies do not state explicitly on which theory they are based

It is quite common place that a ‘theory-less’ science is not possible. In this sense, qualitative case studies are criticised if they do not state explicitly on which theory they are based, i.e. on which theoretical basis the investigation was carried out, questions were asked, data gathered and conclusions formulated (‘Tell me your theoretical background and I tell you how and what you think!’).

In order to understand this criticism better it helps to differentiate between definitions, assumptions and theory. In principle, every meaningful statement is either a definition (laying down the meaning of a sign or term, i.e. no additional information) or an assumption (considering something temporarily for true, i.e. providing information). In this sense, a definition- and assumption-less reasoning is not possible. Human reasoning is making assumptions based on definitions and science is human reasoning. However, there are certain types of assumptions and a theory comprises very specific ones. In its most basic form, a theory might be described best by the Hempel–Oppenheim model. According to this model, an in-content theory is made of at least two assumptions, one stating a general law (quite often referred to as ‘the theory’), the other one describing the specific conditions under which this law is relevant. We need general laws only for two cases—when we want to either explain or predict something on a scientific basis. Generalisations, explanations or predictions always require an in content theory.

Now, for the whole process of gathering and structuring data, describing objects of reasoning and providing insights into a particular case one does not need a general law.\(^3\) As long as a case study remains in the descriptive mode (what many case studies do) there is

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\(^3\) Gathering data systematically, describing objects of reasoning in a scientific manner, and formulating general assumptions are (always) based on logical and methodological theories (e.g. theory of classical logic, correspondence theory, hypothetico-deductive approach and the like). In contrast, the issue addressed here refers only to in content theories, i.e. theories that cope with the relation between the content of data and related conclusions.
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no need for an in content theory. Science, at least some parts of science and social sciences are indeed possible without theory. However, particularly in qualitative case studies the reasoning progresses from presenting data and describing a particular setting to generalising the findings, providing explanations, and formulating conclusions and predictions. If these transitions are not clearly marked and this kind of reasoning is not based on explicitly stated theories then, indeed, the criticism is justified. It seems that a shift from a methodological more or less precise description of some findings to increasingly unjustified generalisations and conclusions far beyond what the data actually tell happens quite often in qualitative case studies. Hence, if case studies shall provide more than descriptions of single issues or events they must come forward with explicitly formulated in content theories providing the basis for generalisations, explanations, or predictions that can be tested.

3 Collecting data

V The selection of the unit of investigation does not happen systematically and objectively

For gathering empirical data site(s) or units of investigation have to be selected. Barbour (2003, p. 1021) criticises this process as being more convenience than purposive sampling. For example, companies are not chosen because they are representative for that particular industrial sector but because of already established links to one or some of their managers, because they are famous, they replied positively to a research request or just because they are located in a country or region in which the researcher has a personal interest. In a methodological sense they are selected randomly, quite often according to researcher’s personal interests. This may raise concerns because having not checked all possible sites leaves the question open why the site chosen is ‘typical’ and ‘representative’ (Wainwright 1997).

It seems that two different types of representativeness are being confused, a quantitative and a qualitative one. To check all possible sites systematically (‘objectively’) and to find then a quantitatively representative sample is only crucial if the findings shall be generalised by statistical means. In contrast, if the findings shall be generalised qualitatively—e.g. in the sense of grounded theory and with the belief that an inductive approach is possible—then there is no methodological need whatsoever for quantitative representativeness or that the unit of investigation was selected ‘objectively’. What is needed is assurance that the unit of investigation are suitable for the type(s) of problem(s) that shall be investigated. They are suitable if they can provide the objects of reasoning as well as all relevant criteria and circumstances (e.g. cultural background, institutions) that are needed to be taken into account in order to investigate the research problem appropriately. It is the unit of investigation that counts, not the way how it was identified.

VI The selection of interviewees does not happen systematically and objectively

The same argument of representativeness is put forward concerning the selection of interviewees. For example, Deem (2001, p. 17) criticises a particular case study: “Little attention seems to have been paid to the selection of interviewees who would enable contentious or debatable statements to be interrogated and cross-checked. Thus the claims to empirical generalisability of the data are not sustainable.”

4 However, researchers often feel the need to provide a retrospective justification or ‘ex post-rationalisation’ for their selection of sites. Such a justification might be necessary for keeping one’s own reputation in the scientific community but it has no methodological relevance for qualitative research.
Again, this is not a problem in the sense of quantitative representativeness—but it is a very serious criticism in a qualitative sense. In the case of research primarily based on interview data the selection of interviewees decides who’s worldviews, opinions, and interests will be taken into account—and who’s will be ignored and excluded! Particularly in organisations (or other social systems) the selection of interviewees depends to a great extent on the goodwill of powerful and influential people within the organisation. And these people, of course, know what is at stake. Hence, already the selection of interviewees is part of organisational politics. Only interviewees selected have the opportunity to put forward their worldviews and, therefore, influence the outcome of the research. The victims of such research are “those who have relatively little opportunity to influence its nature and direction, but whose interests may be adversely affected by its results.” (Easterby-Smith et al. 1991, p. 47). Therefore, Caputo (1987, p. 260, cited in: Angen 2000, p. 388) rightly suggested that we must “do everything we can to see to it that the debate is fair, that no one’s voice is excluded or demeaned, and that the vested interests of the powerful, who usually end up having their way, are restrained.” The least one can do (and has to do) is to describe clearly which persons were interviewed, their status, to limit the findings and conclusions to these particular worldviews, which are only a certain part of social reality, and put them into perspective, i.e. the wider picture.

VII Interviewees are influenced by the interview situation and are not a reliable source for information because of unconscious bias

It is not only the interviewer but also the interviewee(s) who ‘spoil’ the data. One way this can happen is unconsciously, i.e. that the interviewee (and perhaps the interviewer, too) is not aware of the influences of the interview situation and his or her internal, unconscious reactions to being asked ‘officially’ about certain issues. Alvesson (2003, p. 169) explained that interviewees follow “cultural scripts about how one should normally express oneself on particular topics” and, hence, the interview is “better viewed as the scene for a social interaction rather than a simple tool for collection of “data”.”

There are, indeed, in each of us internalised norms, cultural scripts deeply embedded in our personality and attitudes which strongly influence our worldviews, reasoning and social actions. People quite often state and see as their opinion what is basically nothing more than stereotypes and statements prepared in the catacombs of media, public and professional opinion makers or somewhere else ‘in the society’. However, for many research questions it is not necessary to dig deeper in order to reveal the hidden layers of a person’s personality and his or her ‘real and genuine experiences or ideas’—on the contrary: It might be exactly these cultural scripts and stereotypes (and perhaps the first level of their reflection) the interviewer might be interested in and which he wants to reveal in order to answer the research question.

Interview data are through social interaction motivated statements. To understand the collection of data by interviewing people as social interaction draws the attention to the fact that there is no such thing like a neutral, non-intervening and non-existent interviewer. The interviewer is an active part of the social interaction and he or she has to intervene in that sense that the interviewee makes statements he or she would not make otherwise. It is true that an interviewee can be influenced very directly or even being forced by an interviewer to make certain statements. Taking such extreme interventions aside, it is the very nature of

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5 To a certain extent this argument is also true for the selection of documents or other primary data sources. For example, despite all attempts to provide information as objective as possible ‘embedded reporters’ have little chance to report anything else than the views of the forces they accompany.

6 For deeper aiming questions a ‘normal’ interview situation might not be enough and more sophisticated psychological and/or therapeutic interview techniques might be needed.
data stemming from ‘normal’ interview situations that they mirror what people regard and reveal as their conscious thoughts in a social setting—nothing more or less.

VIII Interviewees are not a reliable source for information because of conscious and deliberate attempts to mislead the interviewer

However, the former point of unconscious biases raises a further, perhaps more problematic issue. Interviewees might be keen to answer all questions as truthfully, comprehensively, and precisely as they can. However, social science research often addresses issues and raises questions which, for whatever reasons, might be difficult to answer for the interviewees. Hence, the interviewer must take into account that interviewees either not capable or not willing to answer the question (fully), that they might be quite suspicious, that they have their own ideas and intentions which are not necessarily of great help for revealing ‘the truth and nothing but the truth’. To be more precise: There might be conscious and deliberate attempts by the interviewee to mislead the interviewer. For example, one strategy is ‘socially accepted answering attitude’, i.e. an interviewee mainly provides such answers he or she assumes they are expected from him or her, the interviewer wants to hear, and which are socially accepted. The interviewee tries to provide the interviewer with ‘information’ that do not reveal what he or she really thinks but what appears to be plausible, appropriate and sufficient. “Interviewees are frequently politically conscious actors” (Alvesson 2003, p. 170).

Such provision of false, at least misleading information and impressions is driven by particular interests of the interviewee. These interests might stem from one’s own social position, job-related tasks and duties, personal objectives and plans, worldviews and ideologies. Almost every answer is then thought through in the light of these interests—and to serve them as good as possible. The degree of how successfully an interviewee misleads the interviewer depends on his or her intellectual capabilities, experiences with interview situation, ethical and moral values, social and power status, and the actual relation with the interviewer. Such behaviour and attempts can be found throughout the whole society. However, the problem is usually greater with people of higher social status, for example politicians, celebrities, members of the establishment, professionals, and senior managers. People inheriting socially privileged positions usually are very aware of the necessity of political correctness and the danger of saying ‘the wrong things’, in particular when the question raises issues that are (potentially) power-sensitive.7 Then, the interviewer is being provided with stereotypes, latest management buzzwords, fads and fashions, the official strategy or party line. But apart from straightforward examples it is often not easy, if not impossible, to realise whether people really say what they mean and mean what they say. Particularly interviewees with greater experience and/or of higher social status provide false and misleading information by and large in a more eloquent, perhaps even charming and convincing way than less experienced interviewees. Interviewers, therefore, should treat interview statements always quite critically and with some distance, since at least the possibility that an interviewee did not tell what he or she really thinks can not be excluded. In particular the experienced interviewer usually realises when he is provided with little more than official statements and mainstream twaddle. Then, the interviewer might even change to a more

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7 As Easterby-Smith et al. (1991, p. 45) described it: ‘Most managers are in a position where they can easily decline to provide information for researchers; they are also adept at handling face-to-face interviews and at managing interaction with strangers. Managers, especially senior ones, spend a lot of their time handling relations with colleagues and with competitors and other external bodies. In such circumstances they are only too aware of the significance of information and the importance of determining what use it might be put to, and by whom.’
‘tactical’ or interrogating questioning. However, many interviewees will be able to cope also with such tactics. Hence, by large the possibilities to counteract serious attempts of the interviewee to ‘cheat’ are quite limited within normal interview situations. If an interviewee does not want to say what he or she really thinks then there is only little chance to convince him or her otherwise. This is, of course, not very pleasant for the interviewer but it also can be seen in a positive way. ‘Tactical answering’ is in itself an important data since it is evidence for the dominant ideology/mainstream thinking and a crucial part of the social and political dimensions of social systems.

4 Internal validity of data and making sense of data

IX Interview data are not sufficient because of their quality, quantity, or the time frame they cover

There are also reasons why interview data as such cannot provide a sufficient base for answering the research question(s) and/or drawing conclusions. By large the criticism is three-fold: One concern is about the quality of the data, another about their quantity, the third with regard to the time frame.

a Quality

Interviews can reveal ideas and deliver insights no other method can provide. However, the two previous sections showed that unconscious, through socialisation internalised thought patterns and attitudes as well as conscious attempts to mislead limit the quality of interview data. Increasing the amount of interviews carried out can solve this problem to a certain extent. Asking the same people several times (in the hope that increased trust supports the gathering of more in-depth data) and/or asking different people about the same issues (in the hope that certain pattern will emerge) can improve the quality of interview data.

Nonetheless, asking people is often not enough. What people say or don’t say is only part of the picture. There is a definite need for further checking and additional information. This can and should be done in the sense of triangulation (Meijer et al. 2002, p. 146), i.e. referring to additional data sources (e.g. data collected from different persons, or at different times, or from different places), using different methods (e.g. observation, interviews, documents, etc.), using different researchers, applying different theories, and using different types of data. Since all methods and approaches have their strengths and weaknesses and are appropriate only for certain problems the combination of a few methods and tools helps to get a fairly good picture. The use of a particular method is not for the sake of having used it or because of ideological reasons, but whether or not the data gained with this method can have the methodological and in content quality that is necessary for answering the research question. It is a practical, not a political issue.

b Quantity

Another complaint is about too small numbers of interviews carried out (Deem 2001, pp. 14, 16). Because of this, they are not regarded as trustworthy or representative. Again, like the criticism in Sect. 3.1 concerning the selection of the unit of investigation this argument is based on a quantitative understanding of representativeness aiming at statistical validity.
In this sense, the complaint is irrelevant since there are no quantitative relations whatsoever between interview data and their interpretations, no algorithm that links the number of interviews and interview data to generalised statements and conclusions.

Nonetheless, the complaint is worth to be considered in another sense. Because of several biases there is no great assurance that data stemming from interviewing one person already ‘tell the whole story’. In contrast, data from different interviewees referring to the same issues will provide a much broader picture. They enable the interviewer to cross-check and compare the data. Much more, the data might lead to emerging patterns and, hence, to more, deeper and better insights into the matter. In this sense, an increase in the amount of interviews carried out increases the quality of the research. However, there is no way of determining which number is sufficient. However, there is no formula describing what a sufficient amount of interviews and data is. It is up to the researcher when he or she feels that enough interviews were carried out.

However, an increase of the number of interviews carried out and interview data gained might be more reassuring and convincing in a daily sense but it does not increase their validity in a methodological sense. Whether one or a million people think a wall is green might be seen as a different degree of evidence and we are usually more convinced by what the majority regards as true and right. Nonetheless the wall can be blue. Validity is not a numbers game.

c Time frame

Finally, the internal validity of data stemming from interviews are sometimes questioned because of their ‘snapshot character’ and the lack of longitudinal material (Deem 2001, p. 14, Jensen and Rodgers 2001, pp. 237–239). This might be a serious criticism, in particular when the research question aims at issues for which change and development over a (longer) period of time are crucial aspects. The snapshot character and situation-dependence of interviewer’s statements can be balanced by referring to other sources (e.g. internal documents or other case studies) and spreading the interviews over a certain time period. However, quite often there will be still a difference between the time and place interview data where gathered and the time and place the actual events or situations interviewees are being asked about have happened or will happen. This is simply in the nature of interviews.

X The internal validity of the data is low—they do not mirror reality

Because of the many aspects mentioned in the previous sections there are complaints that interviews and interview data can not reflect ‘the reality’ (e.g. Alvesson 2003, p. 169). Therefore, the internal validity of interview data as “informational statements that describe what was observed and experienced” (Winter 2000) is highly questioned. This criticism is mainly based on correspondence theory, i.e. that a statement shall mirror reality with words. Correspondence theory refers to one of the basic philosophical problems whether there is an objective reality and, if so, whether humans are able to make it out objectively. The problem of validity is relatively easy to solve concerning the material world that can be investigated (and the sciences of it). Concerning social reality it is more complicated because the social world is both constructed by and made of people who see, perceive, and interpret things differently.

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8 A much cited definition of ‘validity’ is that of Hammersley’s (1987, p. 69, cited in: Winter 2000; Altheide and Johnson 1998, p. 288): ‘An account is valid or true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise.’
On the one hand, it has been suggested to regard ‘validity’ not as a single, fixed or universal concept (Winter 2000) but as interpretive or subjective understandings of truth (Angen 2000, p. 386; Winter 2000). However, it seems that the simple fact that each of us perceives, sees, and interprets the world subjectively and, hence, differently has lead many researchers away from the notion of truth and towards relativism. ‘Researchers describe and interpret differently what people see differently!’ Although this statement might be quite a good description of the nature of qualitative empirical research, it doesn’t sound too assuring for the case of validity in social sciences if it is left in this condition.

On the other hand, the notion of positivism to reveal ‘the truth’ about a complex social situation seems equally little convincing. Already in our daily experience we time and again (have to) learn and accept that people simply see things differently and that there is no such thing as ‘the one and only truth’. As soon as human beings are involved ‘objectivity’ has lost its straightforward, one-dimensional meaning. So, is there any another solution for the internal validity of interview data between relativism and positivism? To answer this question it might be helpful to think about what could be meant by the validity of interview data. In an interview situation people state their opinions, subjective interpretations, beliefs, world-views or the like concerning what they perceive as the reality ‘out there’ as well as their own inner reality (‘real world’). The ‘real world’ might be called ‘first reality’. The case study the researcher then states his subjective interpretations of what he has perceived or recorded as the statements of interviewees (‘interview world’). These statements might be called ‘second reality’. The presentation of interview data cannot reveal or demonstrate with certainty whether the statements provide a true picture about the first reality. On the basis of interview data one can not say whether the wall is indeed blue (see above Sect. 4.1.2). But the interview data provide evidence for what the people interviewed have described as their perception of the wall. Hence, the presentation of interview data can be assessed in the sense how well it mirrors the second reality, i.e. the statements of the interviewees. In other words: The internal validity of interview data can be assessed concerning how well the statements made by interviewees about their perceptions and opinions (second reality) are mirrored in the presentation of the findings. In contrast, there is no possibility to assess the internal validity of interview data concerning the real world (first reality).

XI There are no objective criteria for the selection and grouping of the data

The internal validity of the data is also influenced by the researcher. Like the selection of the research problem, unit of investigation, and research questions the selection of the data gathered depends to a large extent or even solely on the judgment of the researcher. Generally speaking, the selection and grouping of data (first steps of working on transcripts, search for categories and patterns, mark up or cut up the data, and construct outline—Wainwright 1997) are mainly countless decisions about the inclusion and exclusion of data in the report, their relative status and importance within the whole framework.

The selection of data is first a ‘technical’ problem. As Alvesson (2003, p. 173), has noted “only a very small portion of all that which has been said by the interviewees and observed, usually during several weeks or months, can appear in a publication or even fully considered

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9 There are many different concepts of validity such as: successor validity, catalytic validity, interrogated validity, transgressive validity, imperial validity, simulacra/ironic validity, situated validity, and voluptuous validity (Altheide and Johnson 1998, p. 289), truth value, credibility, trustworthiness, authenticity, and goodness (Whittemore et al. 2001, p. 527) or adjectives like worthy, relevant, plausible, confirmable, credible or representative. (Winter 2000). For a comprehensive and systematic overview of criteria for validity in qualitative research see (Whittemore et al. 2001, pp. 529–532).
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in analysis. . . . To accomplish a text that gives a good account in the sense of “mirroring” a reality represented in all this empirical material is very difficult, if not impossible . . . “. According to the last comment it becomes obvious that the problem goes well beyond technical aspects. The decision which data shall be used (and which not) is primarily a qualitative problem. On the one hand, the data shall give a valid description of what has been investigated. The assumption and expectations, therefore, are that the data somehow are selected ‘objectively’. On the other hand, there is no formula whatsoever pointing at the importance, weight and relevance of data, and how they are related to each other. In qualitative studies the selection and grouping of data does not follow an algorithm. It is solely based on subjective decisions made by the researcher. And exactly this is the problem. Researchers, of course, want to make a case for something, they want to tell a story and select and arrange the data accordingly. This, beside other reasons, leads to the result that no two researchers will finally come up with the same data even if they had investigated the same unit of investigation under the same research question, at the same time and with the same methods (Achenbaum 2001, p. 14; Winter 2000).

One suggestion for solving this problem is that two or more researchers shall code the material independently and that their results are being compared, discussed, and finally agreed. This, indeed, can improve the quality of this part of the research process. Nonetheless, the selection still happens on the basis of subjective criteria. Even the most detailed coding—in the hope that this guarantees a higher level of objectivity—still requires subjective decisions concerning the inclusion and exclusion of data. A different team of researchers would select different data from the same data set. Pyett (2003, p. 1171), hence, suggests “a degree of trust in the diligence and integrity of the researcher’ based on the ‘demonstration of the researcher’s honesty, reflexivity, discipline, and rigor.” This claim might be supported by almost everyone. However, Fine (1993, p. 269) made the point that one can expect researchers only to be as honest ‘as lawyers, clergymen, doctors, and car salesman’. There is no chance whatsoever to control a researcher’s work on the data (or the desk or laboratory work of other professionals) and there is no chance to achieve any kind of positivistic (pseudo-) objectivity in the process of selecting data. It is a creative process and its quality, for better or worse, is a result of the skills and courage of the researcher. The selection and provision of data is and remains the result of subjective decisions of a researcher—and all the interests and influences he takes consciously or unconsciously into account during this process.

XII The interpretation of the data and writing up of the findings are characterized by ambiguity and subjectivity of the researcher

What is true for the selection and grouping of data is even truer for their interpretation and the writing up of the findings. Making sense of data and interpreting them is a necessity since “nothing speaks for itself” (Denzin 1998, p. 313). However, concerning credibility Drisko (1997) demanded that “interpretations must be authentic and accurate to the descriptions of the primary participants.” Again, this might be seen as making the case for objectivity. However, in the previous section it became clear that because of subjective views and decisions an aspect investigated by different researchers will definitely reveal different results. MacPherson et al. (2000, p. 53) call it the “uncertainty of interpretation”, Henwood and Pidgeon (1994, p. 233), a “hermeneutic circle of multiple, partial, and competing interpretations.” So, it is again up to a researcher’s subjectivity. Interpretation is done by an interpreter or storyteller (Denzin 1998, p. 325) and the authors are, of course, very keen to demonstrate their own personal interpretations, something new, differently, original. It might be even the other way round. If someone wants to portray things in a certain way he or she will
have not many problems to provide the appropriate empirical evidence for it. First comes the interpretation (based on one’s own worldviews and interests), then the provision of corresponding evidence.

However, what first appears to be negative is at the same time the great strength of the subjective dimension in qualitative empirical research—even in sciences in general. If Galileo had not had the interest to interpret the same data in a very different way compared to his colleagues, had then tried to formulate a new theory that would fit better to his different interpretation and finally provided evidence for it, we would still believe that the sun goes round the earth. In this sense, a researcher can, and even should feel free to come up with any interpretation he or she thinks is the best one. There is neither the possibility of nor the need for any pseudo-objective standards. To be clear: Endless freedom in the selection and interpretation of empirical data does not mean at all that ‘anything goes’. There are still ethical, moral, legal, philosophical, social, technical, practical and professional standards in place which the researcher has to take into account.

5 External validity of qualitative empirical findings

XIII It is not possible to generalise the findings or to formulate a theory

Concerning the relation between findings and the formulation of theory qualitative empirical research can be differentiated into two types. The idea of most case studies is just to gain data and insights about a particular issue at a certain site, to tell a (hopefully interesting) story about it, i.e. to present data and to describe what has been found (Blichfeldt and Andersen 2006, p. 5). In other case studies researchers go beyond mere descriptions and generalise the findings in one way or another. In doing so, they sometimes try to discover “theory from data systematically obtained from social research” (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 2). In this section it shall be referred only to the latter type. Particularly in the UK and its long tradition of empiricism going back to Hume, formulation of theory is mainly done inductively, in social research often on the basis of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), i.e. (1) gathering data, (2) replication of the facts with comparative evidence, (3) generation of conceptual categories and properties from evidence, (4) formulation of hypotheses or generalised relations among the categories and their properties—whereby (3) and (4) can lead to the formulation of either substantive or formal theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967, pp. 23–24, 32–33, 35–43).

Now, at the heart of this methodological problem is the question whether it is possible to generate theory in such an inductive way. The answer is easy. Of course, it is possible. Inductivism in general and grounded theory in particular provide a methodologically sound and pragmatic guide for generalising empirical findings. The only problem is doing it—and doing it properly! According to Barbour (2003, p. 1021) in many case studies the use or even formulation of theory quite often happens on a not very sound methodological basis or no basis at all. For at least some kind of ‘justification’ the name of grounded theory (or other theories) is misused in order to “justify the selection of (often spectacularly unremarkable) themes derived from qualitative data—often in the absence of any evidence of iterative refinement and revision of coding categories and gradual theory development.” Instead of taking the idea and suggested steps of grounded theory seriously many qualitative case studies simply mix and mess data with personal beliefs of their authors. Generalisations are somehow made either in between the descriptive parts or in a short last concluding section. In order to meet all methodological standards required for both the descriptive as well as theory-oriented parts sufficiently researchers may think about to write two papers: one paper to present the
findings stemming from a particular qualitative empirical research and to tell an interesting story about it—and another paper to create categories, formulate either a substantial or formal theory and identify all relevant aspects and circumstances under which the theory applies.

XIV The findings cannot be tested or replicated because of their unique nature and a predominant relativistic understanding, case studies do not contribute to the advancement of social sciences.

Although inductivism and grounded theory can be quite practical tools for generalising findings there might be also a misunderstanding among their proponents. The formulation of a theory according to grounded theory does not guarantee its validity. As Popper (1979) has pointed out so clearly; whether one has seen one or a hundred white swans, in both cases one may come to the conclusion that all swans are white and formulates the category of ‘white swans’. However, the general statement that all swans are white is not a valid theory, but a hypothesis. That it initially was based on some empirical evidence might be a first indicator that it could be valid—but that’s it. Although grounded theory provides some empirical evidence, all what it can deliver is empirical-based hypothesis. Qualitative techniques in general are “invaluable tools for hypothesis formulation” (Achenbaum 2001, p. 13). According to Popper, the (temporary) validity of a theory is not its verification by some empirical evidence but the repeatedly failed attempts of its falsification. Hence, perhaps even more than the formulation of theories their repeated use and testing is crucial for furthering (social) sciences and our understanding of reality.

Now, for testing the replication of the conditions that were and are relevant for the assumptions as well as the findings/hypothesis are mandatory. But, as mentioned above, qualitative case studies primarily reveal and generate specific insights gained under specific circumstances. Stake (cited in: MacPherson et al. 2000, p. 52) explained that “the foremost concern of case study research is to generate knowledge of the particular”. And Eden and Huxham (1996, p. 80) comment that, “[b]y its very nature, action research does not lend itself to repeatable experimentation; each intervention will be different from the past.” Knowledge of single events identified under specific conditions and circumstances cannot be repeated or accumulated (Jensen and Rodgers 2001, p. 235)—whereby this is not so much about accumulation in a quantitative or linear sense but more as an affirmative or challenging contribution to existing knowledge in the academic realm. Therefore, in a strong scientific sense, insights stemming from qualitative research, and theories developed on the basis of them, cannot be tested.

Keating (1995, p. 66), hence, made the point “... that one of the weakest elements in this type of research is the failure to explicate the theoretical contribution the case study makes to the literature.” With qualitative empirical research basing its findings on grounded theory we end up in a constant and endless stream of perhaps interesting, nonetheless specific case studies providing singular and context-specific insights. A social science that comprises nothing else but such case studies is an endless chain and even confusing mess of singularities. It keeps individual researchers and academics busy but does not contribute anything to the development of the theoretical knowledge of mankind.

Nonetheless, although every human being and group of people, reasoning and social action, social situation and event, institution and ideologies are unique it is obvious that issues, problems and aspects are often ‘more or less the same’. And, of course, many case studies do indeed cope with quite the same problems of or within the same types of unit of investigations with perhaps not identical, but at least very similar preconditions and circumstances (for example, organisational change in medium-sized and large business organisations in the face of a changing business environment). Hence, case studies can and do refer to other case
studies, research is almost always based on, and refers to prior work (Anastas 2004, p. 59). Such references (as well as systematic literature reviews and meta-analysis) can not only provide evidence that unique insights and singular findings stemming from one site have occurred respectively ‘almost the same’, very similar at other sites. This can be the basis for the identification of emerging patterns, trends, generalisations, and theories as well as their testing. For example, Jensen and Rodgers (2001, p. 239) made the point that a “cumulative meta-analysis of findings from many case studies is a powerful test of generalizability.” However, this depends heavily on researchers’ willingness to review existing literature systematically and comprehensively, and to publish only if they have related their research sufficiently to other research.

6 Implications of the findings for social sciences and social practice

There is a huge lack of critique and critical discussion of academic research and publications

Taking all the methodological aspects mentioned above so far into account one would assume that social scientists are quite critical about the possibilities of qualitative empirical research and scientific reasoning in general. However, despite in the public space of academia, for example in journals or at conferences there is almost no real critique, no hefty arguments, exchange of contradicting opinions, and clashes of cosmologies (anymore). The question is why this is the case. One reason might be of practical nature. Most case studies provide only anecdotal evidence. Hence, many researchers neither see a great need nor many possibilities to criticise them fundamentally. On the contrary—quite understandably they are looking for case studies that support their case and for particular aspects that they can cite in order to justify their case study. The bottom line is a constant stream of case studies referring to each other, if any, in an uncritical and anecdotal way. In addition, the huge increase in the numbers of case studies carried out and published worldwide, much better access to ever more databases and opportunities to download papers immediately, increased pressure to justify one’s own productivity by quantitative measures rather than quality, and the urgent need to come up with new findings suggest that it just doesn’t make much sense to ‘waste’ ones time with criticising the work of others. This individually rational behaviour adds up to institutional silence and creates a vicious circle. But there might be a further, even more worrying explanation. The 1980s were a real turning point in human history. With Gorbachev’s opening-up of the then Soviet Union, the coincidence of conservative governments coming to power in the most important Western Democracies almost at the same time (Reagan in USA, Thatcher in Great Britain and Kohl in West Germany), and finally the fall of the Berlin Wall the ‘competition of the systems’ was decided. It was not only that democracy had won over soviet communism, but a fundamental change in the dominant values of (increasingly global) society took place. Neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism have been without any real competitor since then. Materialism, pragmatism and egoism, market-, shareholder- and efficiency-orientation, quantification and measurement-fever began to dominate every area of society. These ideologies have massively influenced also sciences and social sciences (or were even formulated their). From the late 1980s onwards social sciences are not regarded anymore as a field for carrying out arguments about the primary values and objectives of society and the sciences of it, but as a practical tool to support the interests of particular groups and individuals, to support the notion of improving the effectiveness and efficiency of organisations, to organise societies around business and commerce, and to fit people into
systems of production of goods and services as well as systems of consumption. Social sciences became a mere ‘techne’. Many academics function accordingly and see issues from a pragmatistic rather than categorial and socio-philosophical perspective (e.g. Bryman 2006). Whether technical or ideological reasons; if there is one criterion that differentiates sciences and social sciences from other belief systems (such as religion, political ideologies, or common sense) then it is rational critique, in particular a critical attitude towards one’s own basic assumptions and to challenge and question literally everything systematically, comprehensively, thoroughly and permanently. The course of social sciences will not be furthered by pragmatism but by critique and criticism—and only by them.

XVI Case studies do not place and explain the data in a historical and structural context, there is a lack of critical and constructive contribution to social practice

The relation between social sciences and social practice is anything else but easy or straightforward. In this section it mainly shall be concentrated only on three issues.

a Historical and structural context of the objects of reasoning

One concern is how the aspects investigated in a particular unit of investigation fit into ‘the wider picture’, i.e. certain issues of a particular part of society at a given time, the society as a whole, or the course of mankind. Many qualitative case studies reveal more or less interesting insights concerning the aspects investigated, perceptions and opinions, values and beliefs of particular people in particular situations. However, whereas many case studies describe and perhaps even explain these aspects, very few put the findings sufficiently into a wider historical and structural context, i.e. dominating ideologies, social, economic, political and cultural belief systems and structures (e.g. Wainwright 1997). In order to widen and deepen the descriptive and explanatory part of empirical case studies it is paramount to put them in a historical and societal context. If we want to explain what people think, say and what they do (or what they don’t think, don’t say and don’t do) we have to refer to epochal ideologies and the structural contexts of society.

b In content relation between research and social practice researched

For social science research it is not only important whether it relates to the historical and structural context but also how researcher and their work relate to social practices (thoughts and actions) they investigate. There is the still predominant idea that social science has to be value-free and case studies do not do more and shall not do more than describing and explaining social practice neutrally. This is and has always been a rather heroic, if not unrealistic assumption. Already the selective description of the status quo, in particular of thoughts and actions of people as well as predominant values and objectives of social systems like organisations, serves as an affirmation, their explanation as justification and their generalisation as ideology (Diefenbach 2003, pp. 303–370). Case studies in social sciences always contribute to social practice, either in an affirmative or a critical way. There is no such thing like value-free or neutral social sciences and it is simply not possible to distinct social research and theory from social practice (Angen 2000, p. 388). In this sense, the crucial question concerning qualitative case studies is which and whose reality is represented in what way (Pyett 2003, p. 1173). At present there is much too much orthodox, conservative and affirmative research that is only critical in a technological sense, i.e. concerning the means but not the ends.
c Which objectives/interests, and for whom is it good for?

In close connection to the previous section another crucial question is whose and which ends, objectives, and interests social sciences serve—i.e. for whom the findings are good for. For example, when people are being interviewed they do not only provide (subjective) descriptions but also explanations why things are and should be how they are or why they should be differently in a certain way. They state their personal interests and preferences which often have implications for others (e.g. prejudices, beliefs, visions, values, strategies).

As mentioned above, in media as well as in academic research people of higher social status, members of the establishment are being provided with much more opportunities to further their views—and they usually use such opportunities better. For example, in organisational studies the ideas and needs of top and middle managers are greatly over-represented (Diefenbach 2007). Hence, there is a great danger that social science research relates to and supports in particular the predominant ideologies, values and beliefs, objectives and interests of powerful and influential people or groups of people, that it serves as a “passive legitimation of dominant ideology” (Wainwright 1997). This danger may even increase the more closely researcher and practitioner work together. For example, action research (Keating 1995; Maso 1989, p. 163) can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, close collaboration with practitioners provides the researcher with better data and a richness of new insights which could not gained in other ways (Eden and Huxham 1996, p. 75). On the other hand, the researcher—consciously or unconsciously—might internalise more and more the interests and needs of the clients. Such action research is particularly useful to the clients (Ritchie 2001, p. 127; Eden and Huxham 1996, p. 78), perhaps only to the clients.

Our world is packed with ideologies, personal and group interests (Diefenbach 2007). And it is usually the ideologies of the powerful and privileged which get more attention. At the present there seems to be a huge and widespread lack of critical, alternative, emancipatory, and participative perspectives in social science research. Whatever the positions and convictions of the researcher are—the responsibilities of the researcher go far beyond “a mere presentation” of the findings (Pyett 2003, p. 1173). It is the foremost responsibility of the social science researcher to reveal ideologies behind allegations of functional necessities, to reveal interests behind institutions and discourses, and to address privileges, inequalities and inhuman practices in an active, critical, and straightforward manner, and to enter into and contribute to the discussion about values, interests, and objectives that shape current social practice and possible future developments.

7 Conclusions

Overall, the main methodological problems of qualitative research mainly based on semi-structured interviews comprises can be summarised in Table 1.

The analysis of these problems concerning the scientific value of case studies provides a mixed picture.

First, there is some good news. Concerning some aspects there is more methodological freedom and room for creativity in qualitative research than it seems at first glance. A reformulation of the research question is no problem but a sign for progress and an increasingly better understanding (II.). It is not necessary to select the unit of investigation systematically, i.e. no need for a quantitative representativeness but only for qualitative suitability concerning the problem to be investigated (V.). Researchers can feel encouraged to select and group data as freely as they think is reasonable and as creatively as they are able to (XI.). And they
Are case studies more than sophisticated storytelling?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Methodological problems of qualitative research mainly based on semi-structured interviews</th>
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<tr>
<td>A. Research design, before collecting data and throughout the whole research process</td>
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<tr>
<td>I. A researcher's theoretical position, interests, and political perspective will affect, if not determine, the research question, methodological approach, and the analysis and interpretation of data</td>
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<td>II. There is no precise research question from the beginning, it probably will be redefined or changed during the research process</td>
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<td>III. There are no precise qualitative scientific methods to investigate the research question</td>
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<td>IV. Investigative case studies do not state explicitly on which theory they are based</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. Collecting data</td>
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<td>V. The selection of the unit of investigation does not happen systematically and objectively</td>
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<tr>
<td>VI. The selection of interviewees does not happen systematically and objectively</td>
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<tr>
<td>VII. Interviewees are influenced by the interview situation and are not a reliable source for information because of unconscious bias</td>
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<tr>
<td>VIII. Interviewees are not a reliable source of information because of conscious and deliberate attempts to mislead the interviewer</td>
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<tr>
<td>C. Internal validity of data and making sense of data</td>
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<tr>
<td>IX. Interview data are not sufficient because of their quality, quantity, or the time frame they cover</td>
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<tr>
<td>X. The internal validity of the data is low - they do not mirror reality</td>
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<tr>
<td>XI. There are no objective criteria for the selection and grouping of the data</td>
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<tr>
<td>XII. Interpretation of the data and writing up of the findings are characterized by ambiguity and subjectivity</td>
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<td>D. External validity of the findings</td>
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<td>XIII. It is not possible to generalize the findings or to formulate a theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>XIV. The findings cannot be tested or replicated because of their unique nature and a predominant relativistic understanding, case studies do not contribute to the advancement of social sciences</td>
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<td>E. Implications of the findings for social sciences and social practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>XV. There is a huge lack of critique and critical discussion of academic research and publications</td>
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<td>XVI. Case studies do not place and explain the data in a historical and structural context, there is a lack of critical and constructive contribution to social practice</td>
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can come up with any interpretation of the data they like (XII.). Concerning these aspects there is no need whatsoever for trying or pretending to apply methodological criteria that were primarily formulated for positivistic and/or quantitative approaches.

On the other hand there is some need for a greater methodological awareness particularly concerning aspects as follows: In order to cope with the possible downsides of subjectivity researchers have to make their own (implicit) assumptions, interests, and objectives concerning the research as well as social practice as explicit as possible (I.). Methods for qualitative research have to be used as precisely as possible (III.). In particular, since in many qualitative case studies the reasoning progresses from a mere presentation of data and description of a particular setting to generalisations of the findings, there is a definite need to state as explicitly as possible on which in content theory these are based (IV.).

On the one hand more methodological freedom, on the other hand some need for more methodological rigour concerning the research design and the use of methods. But there are more, quite serious concerns the analysis has revealed. The core of any research is, of course, the data and findings. But already the source for collecting data, the interviewees, is far from ‘perfect’. Their selection (or exclusion) is part of (organisational) politics and influences the outcome of the research to a large degree. The then revealed particular worldviews and interests have to be put into perspective, i.e. the wider picture of social reality (VI.). Because of unconscious biases in a normal interview situation interviewees by and large do not reveal...
their ‘real and genuine’ experiences and opinions but cultural scripts, stereotypes, socially expected answering patterns, perhaps followed by some reflections on what they regard as their conscious thoughts (VII.). Furthermore, in particular power-conscious interviewees of higher social status (for example politicians, celebrities, members of the establishment, professionals, and any kind of senior managers) often provide little more than official statements, mainstream buzzwords and fads-and-fashions twaddle in order to deliberately mislead the interviewer and the public. However, such ‘tactical answering’ is in itself an important data and evidence for the dominant ideology/mainstream thinking (VIII.)—if it is discovered and revealed. However, because of these and other reasons, the internal validity of interview data is questionable. Although increasing the amount of interviews carried out might improve the quality of the data gathered and will reveal emerging patterns, it will not increase their validity (IX.). Much more, interview data cannot provide any evidence about ‘reality’/‘the real world’. The internal validity of interview data can be only assessed concerning how well the opinions stated by the interviewees are presented in the findings (X). Altogether, there is a definite need for further checking and additional information in the sense of triangulation (IX.). But even then the descriptive ‘validity’ might be questioned since the selection and grouping of all data, as well as their interpretation and the writing up of the findings, happen solely on a subjective basis (XI.),—which is at the same time the great strength and positive side of the subjective dimension in qualitative empirical research (XII.).

Nonetheless, even a mountain of (new) insights into a particular problem in a certain setting leave the question open what further relevance the findings have or can have. Although it is possible to generalise the findings and even formulate a theory based on data stemming from qualitative empirical research,—if done properly and on a sound methodological basis (XIII.)—there is no guarantee for its external validity. Inductivism is only a tool for formulating hypothesis, not to provide validity of theories. Only their repeated use and testing, tried and failed falsification (Popper 1979) can deliver (temporary) validity (XIV.). However, since the findings stemming from qualitative empirical research usually are very specific and unique, the preconditions for having or getting valid theories are difficult.

Despite the serious problems, weaknesses and limitations of qualitative empirical research and case studies there is a lack of critique and critical attitudes towards such academic research and publications. There is a great need for rational critique. In particular, we need a critical attitude towards (basic) assumptions, to challenge, question and criticise literally everything systematically and permanently (XV.). Furthermore, whereas it is the nature of case studies that they reveal some insights about particular settings only some put the findings sufficiently in relation to the wider historical and structural context, i.e. the epochal ideologies and societal structures (XVI.). This is even more of concern since at the present there is too much social sciences research that is much too much affirmative and, if any, only critical in a technological sense. If researchers investigate social practices they have to question whose and which ends, objectives, and interests their research serve. And they have to enter into and contribute to the discussion about values, interests, and objectives that shape current and future social practices.

To sum up: Qualitative empirical research and many of its methods provide useful tools to “discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved.” (Merriam, cited in: Caelli et al. 2003, p. 3). Whenever someone has carried out some interviews he or she will be almost always surprised by the richness and diversity of the data found as well as emerging patterns of diverse opinions, clashing cosmologies and “multiple realities” (Pyett 2003, p. 1173). However, many qualitative case studies either do not go far beyond a mere description of particular aspects or the generalisations provided are not based on a very sound methodological basis. In contrast, if a researcher paid close
attention to all methodological requirements that are relevant for qualitative social science research, was fully aware of the limits of scientific reasoning based on qualitative empirical data, and put all material into a broader historical, societal, and ideological context then his case study could be much more than narrative tales or storytelling (Denzin 1998, p. 314; Altheide and Johnson 1998, p. 286). At the end of the day it only counts what is written on paper—and nothing else. Researchers come and go, the findings remain.

References


