

Some philosophical and ethical aspects of qualitative research methodologies

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Perspective is one of the component parts of reality. Far from being a disturbance of its fabric, it is its organizing element Every life is a point of view directed upon the universe. Strictly speaking, what one sees, no other can Reality happens to be, like a landscape, possessed of an infinite number of perspectives, all equally veracious and authentic. The sole false perspective is that which claims to be the only one there is.

José Ortega y Gasset, 1923 (1961) *The theme of our time*

PhD Course "Qualitative research methodologies in agricultural and veterinary research", 2-6 nov. 2009

Overview of the lecture

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- ❖ Why use qualitative research methodologies?
- ❖ What are the main differences between qualitative and quantitative methods?
- ❖ How to be critical in qualitative research?

- ❖ Combining qualitative and quantitative methods.
- ❖ What can qualitative research do for quantitative and vice versa?
- ❖ Types of triangulation
- ❖ The dilemma of triangulation

- ❖ A perspectivist generalisation of triangulation

- ❖ Ethical aspects of qualitative research

Why use qualitative research methodologies?

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- ❖ To observe something differently
 - to test or supplement quantitative observations
 - to provide more scientific perspectives on the issue

- ❖ To observe something different
 - where there is no established quantitative method
 - where quantitative observation is not possible
 - when there is an aim to understand individual entities

- Depending on the choice of research question

What are the main differences between qualitative and quantitative methods?

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Quantitative methods:

- ❖ Categorization is needed
- ❖ (Qualitative) knowledge of individual entities is needed to interpret

Qualitative methods:

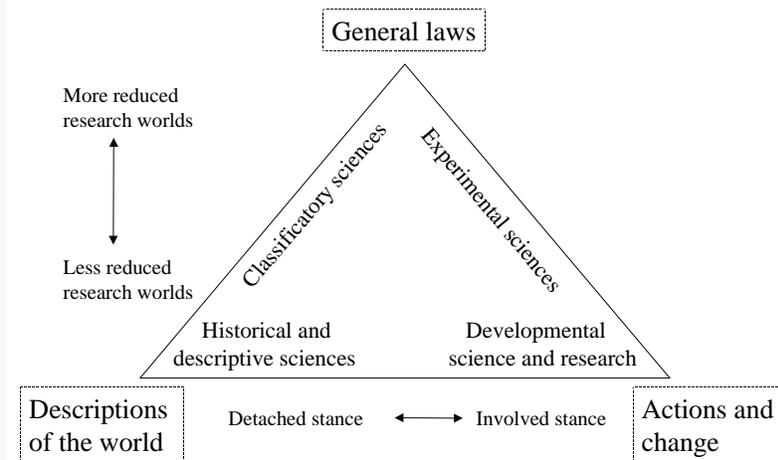
- ❖ (Quantitative) knowledge of representativity is needed to generalize.

But they are **not** different with regard to:

- ❖ Level of study (persons, societies)
- ❖ Degree of involvement
- ❖ Objectivity and relevance (the norms of scientific quality)
- ❖ Influence on the research object (and the ethical aspects)

Two fundamental kinds of differences between scientific disciplines (not qualitative versus quantitative methodology ...)

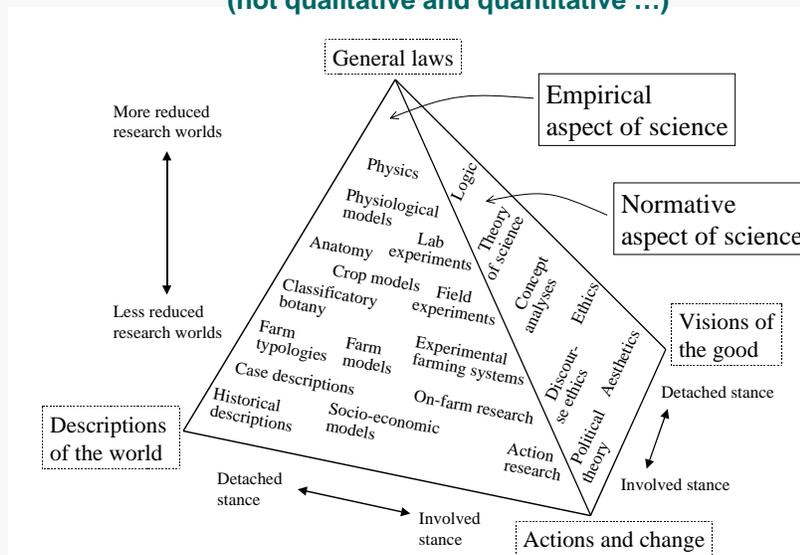
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(Alrøe and Kristensen 2002)

Two fundamental cognitive interests of science: empirical and normative (not qualitative and quantitative ...)

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(Alrøe and Kristensen 2002)

How to be critical in qualitative research? What possible bias to overcome?

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Possible bias in a qualitative method

- ❖ Prejudice: Selection of field data that fit (best show...) the preconception of the phenomenon
- ❖ Eye-catching: Selection of field data that are conspicuous (exotic, telling, interesting ...), over the less interesting
- Systematic approaches ...
- Make assumptions and selections explicit and available for inspection (as a way toward 'reflexive objectivity')

Bias due to the very choice of method

- ❖ No different from quantitative methods (but important!)
- Combining methods, triangulation, perspectivist approach

Criteria for good research

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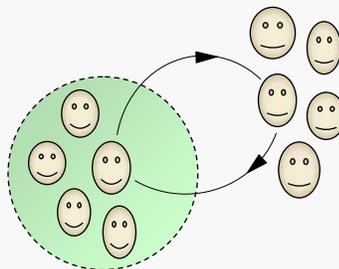
- focusing on the single research perspective
(not different for qualitative and quantitative methodologies ...)

Relevance

Value inquiry

Participation

Transparency



Reflexive
objectivity

Communicating the
cognitive context

- observational
- intentional
- societal

(Alrøe and Kristensen 2002)

Combining qualitative and quantitative methods

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“Within-method” combining

- ❖ Sequential (optional steps in the research process)
- ❖ Hybrids (necessary elements/phases)

Combining methods

- ❖ “Triangulation” (combining different methods for epistemological purposes)
- ❖ More generally, combining methods is an aim and a feature of crossdisciplinary research in complex systems
- But combining methods is generally NOT a trivial matter

What can qualitative research do for quantitative and vice versa?

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What can qualitative methods do for quantitative?

- ❖ Understanding motives, etc.

What can quantitative methods do for qualitative?

- ❖ Overcome the “nearsightedness” of social actors concerning societal and structural conditions

- Other ideas?

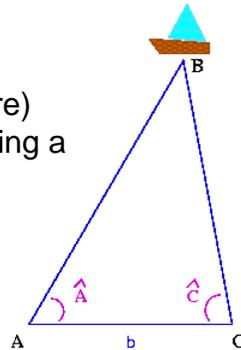
Types of triangulation

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- ❖ Data triangulation (multiple methods)
 - ❖ Investigator triangulation (multiple investigators)
 - ❖ Theoretical and methodological triangulation (multiple frameworks)
- (Denzin, 1970)

- ❖ Mutual validation (test)
 - ❖ Complementary (giving a fuller picture)
 - ❖ Trigonometrical (prerequisite for getting a picture at all)
- (Kelle 2001)

- ❖ Are we observing the same thing?



The dilemma of triangulation

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(and, more generally, of combining different scientific perspectives)

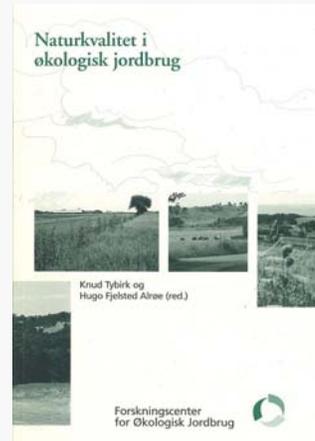
- ❖ Triangulation is desirable for epistemological reasons
 - ❖ Different perspectives are mostly valuable and not reducible to other perspectives
 - ❖ But scientific perspectives are very different
 - ❖ Fundamental concepts are understood differently
 - ❖ Logics, problems and agendas are different
 - ❖ And often some perspectives dominate others and transform the communication in their own image
- Some examples from cross-disciplinary research

Example 1: Nature quality

How to do research in nature quality?

What is good nature?

How do 'natural history-biologists' and 'ecology-biologists' understand nature quality?



(Knowledge synthesis, 2001)

Tybirk, Alrøe and Frederiksen (2004) *Nature quality in organic farming: A conceptual analysis of considerations and criteria in a European context*, J Agr Env Eth 17: 249-274

Research project on nature quality

Research project with four scientific perspectives:

- Natural history biological perspective (WP 3)
- ecological soil biology perspective (WP 4)
- geographical land use perspective (WP 2)
- sociological nature experience perspective (WP 5)

How to handle the (very) different perspectives in the project?

- Cross-cuttings between different WP/perspectives based on shared studie areas and shared data.

(<http://orgprints.org/3921>)

Distinctive concepts of nature

Nature as that which is not human

Controlled, ordered culturally formed nature



The culturalists good nature

Untouched, original, naturally formed nature



The naturalists good nature

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Nature as an allied, humans as part of nature

Ecosystemic concepts of nature

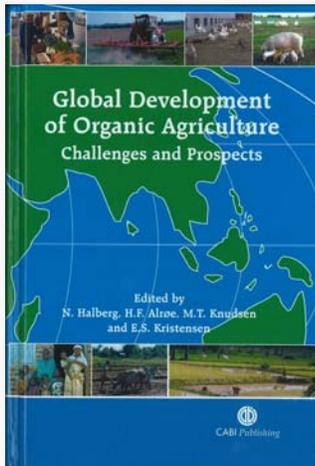
Close and fertile nature, mutual benefits



The ecologists good nature

Example 2: Globalisation and sustainable development - three perspectives

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1. Growth without borders	2. Growth within limits	3. Growth and ecological injustice
Globalization is not a problem, on the contrary: globalization provides new opportunities for the market.	The economic system is dependent on a fragile ecological system with limits to growth.	Development and efficiency are not solutions but causes of social and ecological problems.

(Byrne, Glover and Alrøe 2006, s. 54)

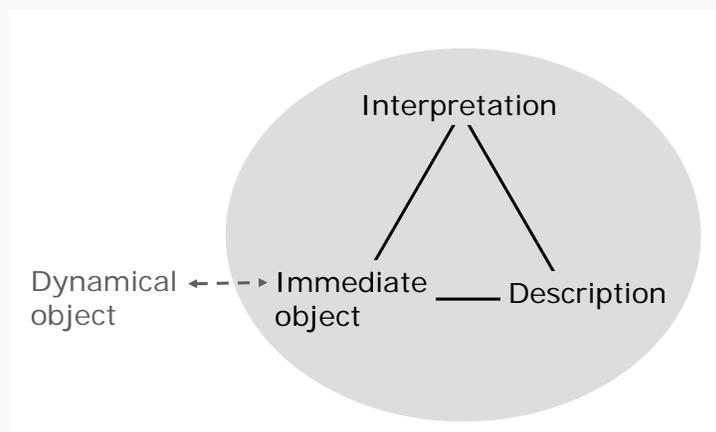
CABI Publishing, 2006
(Based on international knowledge synthesis)

How can organic agriculture meet the challenges of globalization and sustainable development?

	1. Growth without borders	2. Growth within limits	3. Growth and ecological injustice
Focus	Market solutions	Ecological system limits	Individuals and local communities
Relevant discipline	Neo-classical and environmental economics	Ecological economics	Political ecology
Characteristic concepts	Free trade, internalizing external costs	Sustainable scale, finite ecosphere, functional integrity	Ecological justice, fairness with regard to the common environment
How may certified organic agriculture meet the challenges of globalization?	Develop globally recognized principles and regionally adapted standards; create a space for organic agriculture in free trade institutions, e.g. the 'green box' in WTO	Enforce principles of ecology and sustainability in the organic certification standards to resist ill effects of market pressures	Include ecological justice in the organic certification standards to resist ill effects of e.g. distant trade, corporate involvement and large-scale cash-cropping
How can certified organic agriculture offer a solution?	Provide alternative products in the market and increase consumer choices	Provide means to promote sustainability in non-localized food systems with global trade	Provide means to promote ecological justice in non-localized food systems; create alliance with fair trade
How can non-certified organic agriculture offer a solution?	Through institutional protection of vital local primary production systems and markets	Provide a more sustainable strategy to development of local agriculture in low-income countries	Provide local food systems that promote ecological justice; institutional support for their further development

(Halberg, Alrøe and Kristensen, 2006: Synthesis, p. 346)

A perspectivist view - that generalises the idea of triangulation



The semiotic basis, Noe et al 2008, Alrøe and Noe 2008

Are we observing the same thing?

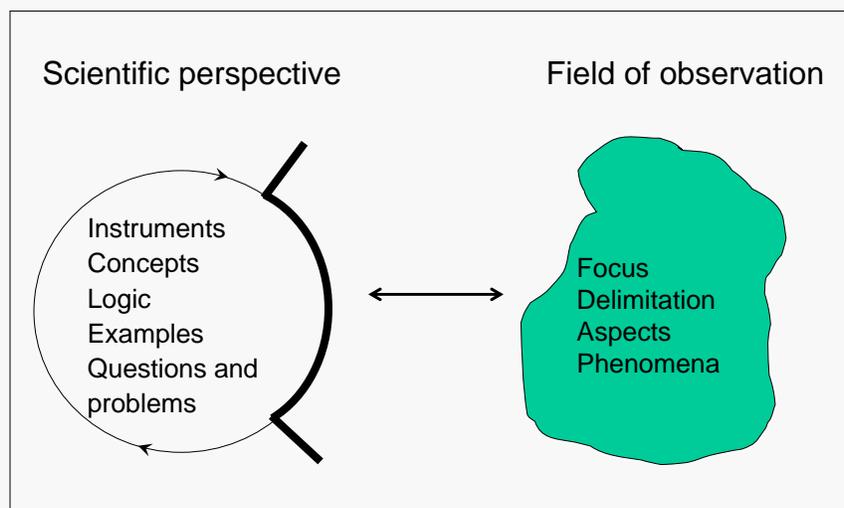
Two conditions for cognition

1. What we see depends on how we see it – and the same thing may therefore be seen in different ways.
 - Any cognition is necessarily a reduction since it is based on a specific context.
 - Any dynamical object has a surplus of possibilities for cognition – there is no complete cognition.

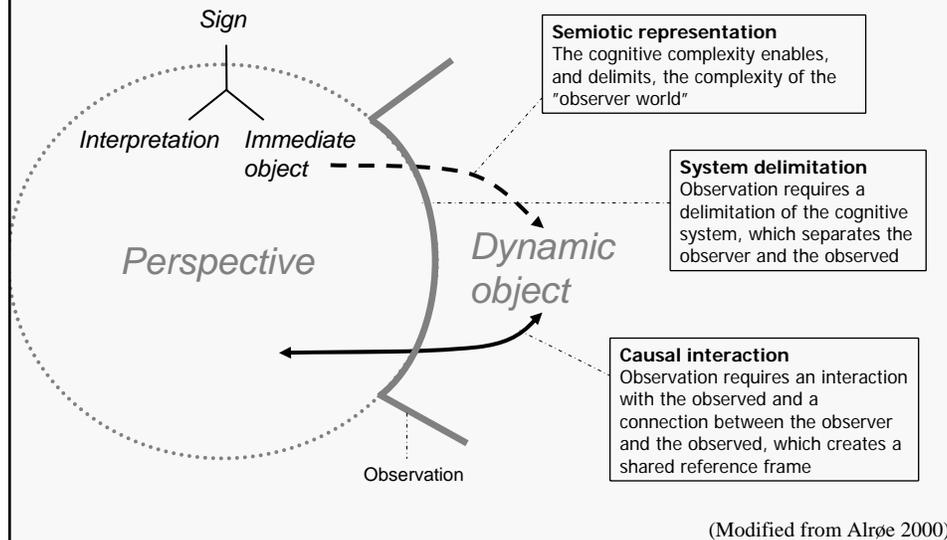
2. We cannot be sure that we see the same thing – even though we say we do.
 - A name or a description creates different interpretations or understandings of different immediate objects for different people – or for different perspectives.
 - Immediate objects do refer to dynamical ‘objects in themselves’, and dynamical objects ‘strike back’ in our interaction with them,
 - but no one of the immediate objects as they are represented in the various perspectives is the same as the dynamical object in itself.

(Alrøe and Noe 2008)

A scientific discipline is a differentiated and refined perspective on a field



A cognitive model of a scientific perspective



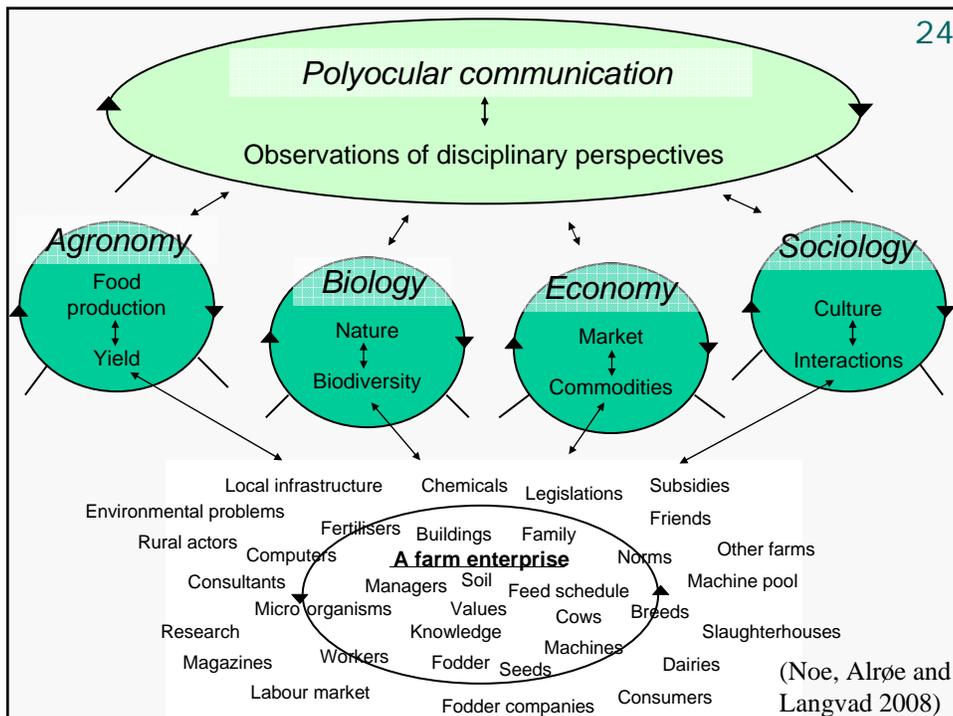
Results of triangulation – some examples

- ❖ Convergent / confirming
 - same truth or same error
- ❖ Complementary
 - complementing perspectives on the same dynamic object
 - perspectives on different dynamic objects
- ❖ Divergent/ contradictory
 - complementing perspectives on the same object but seen as contradictory because the necessary framework to observe the perspectives is lacking
 - overlapping perspectives, one correcting the other

Different types of scientific disagreement, expertise, and learning within and across scientific perspectives 23 - a general framework

	Type of disagreement	Type of knowledge and expertise		Type of learning process
1. Within a perspective	Conservational disagreement	Embodied and tacit knowledge, contributory expertise	Orthodox knowledge, common belief	Socializing, reproducing and refining, normal science
2. On the frame of the perspective	Revolutionary disagreement, unexplained digressions		Heterodox knowledge	Functional differentiation, scientific revolution
3. Between same-order perspectives	"Alien" disagreement, unexplained different beliefs	Acontextual communicational knowledge, interactional expertise		"Learning the language", hegemony, boundary work
4. Second order perspective	Perspectival disagreement	Contextualised communicational knowledge, reflexive expertise		Re-integration in form of second order polyocular communication

(Alrøe and Noe 2009)



What is polyocular (multi-perspectival) communication?

Disciplinary specialised perspectives offer a consistent, effective and precise knowledge in context of a sharply delimited research world.

Polyocular communication can unfold a multidimensional space of understanding based on second order observations of specialised perspectives. (Including observation and communication of the cognitive context)

Polyocular communication can only happen with reference to a shared dynamic object that, it is agreed, can be observed in different ways.

(Noe, Alrøe and Langvad (2008) Sociologia Ruralis 48: 1–15)

What are the main ethical aspects of qualitative research?

- ❖ Within science
 - (different norms of science?)
- ❖ In relation to society
 - (different kinds of influences and consequences?)
- Your ideas? A small discussion exercise

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