

Ontological and Epistemological Foundations of Qualitative Research

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to describe the most relevant features of qualitative research in order to show how, from the Epistemology of the Known Subject perspective I propose, it is necessary to review first the ontological and then the epistemological grounds of this type of inquiry. I begin by following the path that leads from the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject to the Epistemology of the Known Subject, proposed as a new and non exclusive way of knowing. I pass on to describe the primary and secondary characteristics of qualitative research, expressing the need for an ontological rupture. Finally, cognitive interaction and cooperative knowledge construction are considered as two fundamental features in the process of qualitative research grounded on the Epistemology of the Known Subject.

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1. Introduction: the "Way" and the "Ways" of Knowing

The purpose of this paper is to account for the need for reconsideration of the ontological and epistemological foundations of qualitative research. [1]

What is usually called science is, like other ways of knowing, a social construction depending on both scientists' beliefs and values and their strict attachment to abstract methods and measures. Science's "objective" world "is but an interpretation of the world of our immediate experience" (ANGEN, 2000, p.386), which is none other than subjective (LERUM, 2001, p.480). As VALSINER (2006, p.601) has written: "The social representation system of a society at some historical period may selectively guide the researcher to seek general knowledge, or, through denying the possibility of general knowledge, let the researcher be satisfied by descriptions of 'local knowledge'." [2]

Scientific knowledge examines only that reality it has previously created as knowable and defined as its object. It limits itself and restricts the possibility of gaining knowledge of what cannot yet be known because it is beyond the legitimated ways of knowing. Its institutional control operates throughout research development and reaches not only researchers, by determining their options, but also their objects of analysis, by specifying what is "valid" to be known. So called "knowledge" is, therefore, none other than the result of current convention in the world of science, usually associated with the ontology and epistemology characteristic of positivism. Nevertheless, the latter is just one among various possible means of knowledge production. Should we not reflect as Hans-Georg GADAMER (2006, pp.52-53) claims, on the limits of scientific and technological control over nature and society, and turn those limits into the "truths that must be defended against the modern concept of science"? [3]

Among the questions underlying and motivating this paper are the following: is it not the case that the meaning order of so called "scientific knowledge" reduces the possibilities of the social sciences field of knowledge? Are the so called qualitative research legitimacy and representation crises not related, then, to the survival of a realistic ontology in the construction of the "other" in scientific texts? How do qualitative researchers sort out the tension between the supposed "objectivity" that so-called scientific knowledge requires and both the participant actors' and their own "subjectivity"? Is it possible to have access to the participant's identity in qualitative research without calling for an ontological rupture? How are researchers' ontological and epistemological assumptions related to the quality of their research? [4]

The presence of a basic system of ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological assumptions with which researchers approach their research is widely accepted (GUBA & LINCOLN, 1994, p.105; CRESWELL, 1998, pp.74-77; CRESWELL, HANSON, CLARK PLANO & MORALES, 2007, p.238; PATTON, 2002, p.266; SAVAGE, 2006, p.386). [5]

Having once considered that most of the questions social sciences pose have different answers depending on which paradigm is presupposed (VASILACHIS DE GIALDINO, 1992a), at present I think the questions recently introduced lend themselves to different answers depending on whether the Epistemology of the Known Subject I propose is accepted or not. As with any other form of knowing, rather than being exclusive, it complements the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject in which I place such paradigms. [6]

Along this path that I encourage you to take, answers are scarce and questions manifold, and most of them are the result of doubts, uncertainties and breakdowns produced in me during the research process by the presence of that "other's" face that, in front of me, rendered the limits of the ways of knowing used to know him/her all the more apparent. In Emmanuel LEVINAS's words (1991, p.20), what distinguishes a thought about an object from a bond with a person is that in the latter a vocative is articulated: what is named is, at the same time, called. The bond with the other does not come down to a mere representation of the other, it is about invoking him/her. [7]

2. The Path of Epistemological Reflection

Epistemology raises many questions including: 1. how reality can be known, 2. the relationship between the knower and what is known, 3. the characteristics, the principles, the assumptions that guide the process of knowing and the achievement of findings, and 4. the possibility of that process being shared and repeated by others in order to assess the quality of the research and the reliability of those findings. [8]

Unlike epistemology, epistemological reflection does not seek universality; it is neither a "normative" (SCHMIDT, 2001, p.136; MILLER & FREDERICKS, 2002, p.983) nor a finished discipline. It makes up a persistent, creative activity that is renewed time and again. It shows the difficulties faced by researchers when the characteristics of what they intend to know are unprecedented, or else, they cannot be, in part or as a whole, registered, observed, or understood by existing theories and/or concepts nor by available methodological strategies (VASILACHIS DE GIALDINO, 2007a). [9]

Social sciences require that particular epistemological reflections are approached from characteristic theoretical developments and empirical research practice. Such reflections, that are present in scientists' practical activity, even though they may not be named as such, are closely linked with the elucidation of the paradigms in force in the production of every discipline. I define those paradigms as the "theoretical-methodological framework used by researchers to interpret social phenomena in the context of a given society" (VASILACHIS DE GIALDINO, 1992a, p.17). [10]

The notion of paradigm, generated as a consequence of observing the development of a given area of knowledge (KUHN, 1971), is not applicable to other areas. The answers to questions arising from epistemological reflection in

the context of a given science do not constitute the kind of *a priori* knowledge scientific research employs in the remaining sciences. These questions result from the knowledge heritage of each discipline in relation to daily research practice. [11]

I therefore understand that it is not possible to think about a one and only epistemology for all scientific disciplines, or even for a same and particular one. *Epistemological reflection is what enables us to elucidate the different paradigms which give different answers to the questions raised by epistemology.* [12]

As a result of epistemological reflection on social sciences in general, and sociology in particular, I conclude that there are three main coexisting paradigms, two of them already established: the historical materialistic and the positivist one, and a third paradigm—the interpretive one—is on its way to being a more and more unquestioned consolidation. Such paradigms, emerging from established theoretical perspectives, have different ontological, epistemological and, consequently, methodological assumptions; so much so that evolution or reflection produced in one of them is not applicable as such to the others. Likewise, those paradigms are, more often than not, at the basis of the interpretive models used by the speakers to describe social reality. [13]

The development of the social sciences is not, then, progressive in the sense of "one theory replacing another" (KUHN, 1978, p.26). Accumulation, reformulation, improvement and updating of such theories is produced within each paradigm and their appearance is associated with the presence of relevant social events, such as the industrial revolution, which the two, so far, most forcefully established paradigms in these sciences, i.e. the positivist and the historical materialistic, attempt, in unison, to describe, explain and even prescribe their possible futures. [14]

In this way, paradigm coexistence constitutes not an exception, but rather the rule in social sciences (VASILACHIS DE GIALDINO, 1987, 1992a), although the paradigms' notions, names and numbers may differ from one perspective to another. While, for instance, in some cases positivism, postpositivism, critical theory and constructivism are invoked (GUBA & LINCOLN, 1994), in others critical theory is replaced by pragmatism (TASHAKKORI & TEDDLIE, 1998), or positivism, postpositivism, constructivist-interpretivist and critical-ideological are proposed as paradigms (PONTEROTTO & GRIEGER, 2007). Those different paradigms, in general "retrospectively" reconstructed (ATKINSON, 1995, p.119), define what they understand by knowledge and knowledge production in different ways (KINCHELOE, 2005, p.340). The acceptance of such co-presence develops hand in hand with the need for different methods, set in those various paradigms, to grasp "the complex and multi-faceted" nature of reality rather than to guarantee findings validity (MORAN-ELLIS et al., 2006, pp.48-49), in other words, more to analyze in depth than to seek objectivity (FIELDING & SCHREIER, 2001). [15]

These three paradigms I have referred to, and that coexist in social sciences, make up what I call the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject. This kind of

epistemology focuses on subjects that know, spatially and temporally located in their theoretical-epistemological background and methodological tools. These subjects, supplied with those cognitive resources, approach the subjects that are being known and the situations they are in. Those subjects may be understood by assuming, or not, that their characteristics are identifiable with those of an external, objective and objectifiable element, depending on whether the knower's perspective is close to or far away from the positivist paradigm. So, the closer the knowing subjects' orientation to the interpretive paradigm, the shorter the distance between them and those other subjects who are being known. Nevertheless, a distance between the knower and the known, rendering the former "an impartial observer and the other to be subject to the observer's gaze" (SAVAGE, 2000, p.328), often persists in those who, despite carrying out qualitative research, cannot get rid of an empiricist ontology and epistemology. [16]

As I have proposed in previous works (VASILACHIS DE GIALDINO 1992a, p.57), qualitative methods "presuppose and draw on interpretive paradigm assumptions," and the following are their four basic principles: 1. resistance to the "naturalization" of the social world; 2. relevance of the life-world concept; 3. transition from observation to understanding and from the external to the internal point of view; and 4. a recognition of double hermeneutics. These assumptions are specifically linked to a view of language "as a resource and a creation, as a way of producing and reproducing the social world" (VASILACHIS DE GIALDINO, 1992b, p.153). [17]

3. The Epistemological Proposal

The *Epistemology of the Known Subject* I propose does not stem from pure speculation, but from an attempt to approach, with the theoretical-methodological contributions of the three mentioned coexisting paradigms, the study of extreme poverty in the city of Buenos Aires, with a focus on people who define their home address as "on the streets," comparing them to that group of families with precarious accommodation who run the risk of losing it and being also left homeless or "on the streets"¹. [18]

For the Epistemology of the Known Subject, one condition of scientific knowledge is for subjects not to be seen as objects but as subjects, subjects whose ontological reality differs from what the previous epistemology, that of the knowing subject, assumed. For the Epistemology of the Known Subject, the reluctance of researchers to see the subjects participating in the knowledge process as objects is not based on the fact of having a different view of the ontological nature of social reality, but on the fact of claiming different ontological characteristics in relation to the human being's identity. [19]

1 Both inquiries were funded by the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, CONICET [National Council for Scientific and Technological Research], and the Agencia Nacional de promoción Científica y Tecnológica [National Agency for the Promotion of Science and Technology] of Argentina.

This identity has two components: the essential and the existential. The former is *common* to all human beings, is the foundation of their dignity, and constitutes what makes them equal. The latter constitutes the *differential* aspect, distinguishing each human being from the others and making each individual unique. Thus, for instance, in a given context, a person's social, political and work identity would represent expressions of the existential component of their identity. [20]

Both identity components need to be known; you cannot know one through the other. For example, the essential component cannot be known through the existential one, as is the case when identity characteristics end up being assimilated to those of the situation in which the person is acting. Although knowing people cannot be isolated from knowing their situation, for the Epistemology of the Known Subject the person and the situation belong in two different orders of knowledge, and each has its codes, its assumptions, its ways of giving evidence, its legitimacy, its ontology and, therefore, its epistemology. This statement has a fundamental bearing on the whole research process, from the purpose and research question to the definition of analysis units; from sampling decisions to the options on data analysis strategies and, likewise, on the possibility of resorting to triangulation, since it could well be asked: can ontologically different data be compared? [21]

The Epistemology of the Known Subject is not a finished product nor does it aim at substituting the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject. On the contrary, the Epistemology of the Known Subject *is in the making* as a result of applying qualitative methods. It raises a voice where the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject is silent, restricting, mutilating, or limiting. It tries to prevent the voice of the known subject from disappearing behind that of the knowing subject; that is, becoming distorted by having been translated by the "codes" of socially admitted ways of knowing. [22]

The Epistemology of the Knowing Subject and the Epistemology of the Known Subject become complementary, without excluding each other, in the Meta-epistemology I propose and whose characteristics are as follows: 1. it contains both epistemologies, 2. it is open to the addition of new ways of knowing, different from those currently accepted in the scientific world, 3. it calls for intersubjectivity, typical of that world, and 4. it strives for the known subject to be both an active part in the cooperative construction of knowledge and, a totally respected, neither shadowed nor denied, presence in knowledge transmission processes. [23]

4. Qualitative Research Features

Qualitative research comprises different orientations and approaches, various intellectual and disciplinary traditions grounded, often, in different philosophical assumptions. All these different orientations, approaches and assumptions generate new data-gathering and analysis strategies. This variety of views on *what* is known, *what may be* known, *how* it is known and on the way findings are to be transmitted demands an acknowledgment that there is not *one* legitimate

way to conduct qualitative research. However, it is important to highlight that, in spite of such differences there is also a whole group of marked similarities when it comes to designing the features of qualitative research. These similarities revolve around their salient characteristics, which will be specified by returning to the path of epistemological reflection [24]

A systematization of the ever increasing contributions that have tried to define and, at the same time, characterize qualitative research enables those characteristics to be grouped according to: who and what is studied (Section 4.1) particularities of method (Section 4.2) and the goal of the inquiry (Section 4.3). [25]

4.1 Characteristics referring to who and what is studied

Qualitative research is interested, in particular, in the way in which the world is "understood, experimented, or produced" (MASON, 1996, p.4) by people's lives, behavior, and interactions (STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1990, p.17). It is also takes interest in processes, change and social context dynamics (MASON, 2006, p.16; MAXWELL, 2004a, p.36), actors' "perspectives on their own worlds" (MARSHALL & ROSSMAN, 1999, p.7; CRESWELL, 1998, p.15), and in trying to appreciate those worlds through such perspectives (SAVAGE, 2000, p.330; 2006, p.384). Furthermore, qualitative research is interested in the senses, in the "meanings" (MILES & HUBERMAN, 1994, p.10; MAXWELL, 1996, p.17; SILVERMAN, 2000; 2005), in personal narratives, in life stories (ATKINSON, 2005), in accounts, in internal, "life experiences" (WHITTEMORE, CHASE & MANDLE, 2001, p.524; MORSE, 2005, p.859), in the actors' "language," in their "forms of social interactions" (SILVERMAN, 2000, p.89), in their different knowledge, and "viewpoints and practices" (FLICK, 1998, p.6), and in what people think and what that thinking "means, implies, and signifies" (MORSE, 2002, p.875). [26]

4.2 Characteristics referring to method particularities

Qualitative research is interpretive (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 1994, p.2; MASON, 1996, p.4; CRESWELL, 1998, p.15; MARSHALL & ROSSMAN, 1999, p.2; ANGEN, 2000), hermeneutic, inductive (MAXWELL, 2004a, p.36), heterogeneous in methods or uses multiple methods, is reflexive, deep, rigorous, and rejects "the natural sciences as a model" (SILVERMAN, 2000, p.8). It makes use of flexible analysis and explanation methods, sensitive to both the studied people's special features and the social context in which data is produced (MASON, 1996, p.4; GOBO, 2005). It is relational, for it is fundamentally grounded in communication (VASILACHIS DE GIALDINO, 2006). It focuses on real, located practice, and it is based on an interactive research process involving both the researcher and the social actors (FLICK, 1998, p.6; MARSHALL & ROSSMAN, 1999, p.7). [27]

4.3 Characteristics related to the goal of the inquiry

Qualitative research seeks to "discover the new and to develop empirically grounded theories" (FLICK, 1998, p.5), and it is this relation to the act of creating, expanding, modifying and superseding the theory what constitutes the hallmark of

qualitative research. It attempts at understanding, at making the individual case significant in the context of the theory, it opens up new perspectives on what is known. It "explains, defines, clarifies, elucidates, illuminates," constructs, and discovers (MORSE, 2004, p.739; GOBO, 2005). It develops valid causal descriptions analyzing how certain events have an influence on others, and understanding cause-effect processes in a local, contextualized, placed way (MAXWELL, 2004b, p.260). [28]

A deep analysis of the mentioned characteristics enables me to sort them into two relevant groups. Those two groups identify the purpose of qualitative research, which determines the distinctiveness of its method:

1. characteristics referring to the *people*: that is, on the one hand the actors that the research is focused on, together with their actions, works, expressions, interpretations, meanings, and productions, and, on the other hand the researcher who carries out data gathering and interpretation and the production of a final report that social actors in general interact with, and
2. characteristics referring to the *contexts*, the observed social situations where relationships between either actors or actors and the researcher take place. [29]

If qualitative research were carried out, for instance, on documents, on specific textual corpus or pictures, it would be the people's features and their actions, the productions and situations they develop or have developed, and their existence in those which would be examined to answer the research question in order to continue the analysis on the basis of those features. [30]

These two groups of salient characteristics have led me to state that qualitative methods entail and manifest the assumptions of the interpretive paradigm, the grounds of which lie in the need to grasp "the meaning of social action in the context of the life-world and from the actors' perspective" (VASILACHIS DE GIALDINO, 1992a, p.43). Also, for Hubert KNOBLAUCH, Uwe FLICK and Christoph MAEDER (2005) qualitative research leans and depends on a meaning, context, interpretation, understanding and reflection-oriented conception, and it is its rooting in the interpretive, non positivist, paradigm that brings unity to qualitative methods. [31]

To get on with the epistemological reflection I have presented so far, it is necessary to remember that the two groups of qualitative research features, defined as the most relevant, do not belong to the same order. [32]

It is on social actors, their senses, perspectives, meanings, actions, productions, works, and achievements that qualitative research is focused. The person is, then, the vital nucleus of this kind of inquiry and it is those characteristics referring to the people that constitute the *primary characteristics*, those which are fundamental to qualitative research. [33]

On the other hand, it is the characteristics referring to the context, to the situation in which senses are created, perspectives are defined, and meanings are constructed, which make up the *secondary characteristics* of qualitative research, because what matters is the person, but the person placed in a given context. Actors and their situations can hardly be separated in the studies undertaken by social sciences, but it is necessary to establish, at this point, their different ontological condition. As already stated, people cannot be known other than in their context, but they cannot be known through their context. This cognitive assumption, so dear to deterministic theories, deprives the people of action and therefore, of freedom and autonomy by means of a mechanism: ontological assimilation. [34]

The different paradigms, which I placed within the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject, have different ontological assumptions. That is, they determine the particular nature of what is to be known, so much so that they propose different methods for knowing and different validation criteria to assess research quality. In other words, the various philosophical assumptions and theoretical orientations influence qualitative research in such different ways that they are bound to generate "contrasting set of criteria for judging the quality and credibility" (QUINN PATTON, 2002, p.266) of the research. Thus, qualitative research rigor lies in the consistency between the research objectives and the underlying paradigmatic assumptions (HAVERKAMP & YOUNG, 2007, p.289). [35]

According to its characteristics, what is to be primarily known by qualitative research is the person; hence, the Epistemology of the Known Subject should aim at bringing about an ontological rupture as far as human beings' identity is concerned. [36]

The following question could, then, be asked: *why an ontological rupture? A rupture* because the way of knowing proposed by the Epistemology of the Known Subject is focused on identity, but a type of identity which is, at one and the same time, essential and existential, the same and different. That is why there is a break with previous ontological proposals regarding that identity, especially, regarding those relying on the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject. And it is *ontological* because that rupture is no longer aiming at *what* but at *who* is known, his/her idiosyncrasies, features, abilities, and attributes. The question of *who* is known is here prior to the question on *how* it is known. So, I consider, in the same way as Egon GUBA and Yvonna LINCOLN (1994, p.105), that "questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm," but I understand that ontological assumptions referring to identity come first and, therefore, determine epistemological and methodological aspects. [37]

5. Identity and Qualitative Research

Given that the person is at the core of qualitative research, and that *what* is turned into *who*, it is necessary to point out once more that that *who* is, for the Epistemology of the Known Subject, essentially the same although existentially different from the researcher, because the basic principle of essential equality is the foundation of that epistemology. It is such a basic principle for the Epistemology of the Known Subject as is, for instance, the "real character of the main premises" (MARX & ENGELS, 1970, p.19) for historical materialism; or the assumption that "the universal extension of the fundamental dogma of the invariability of natural laws" (COMTE, 1965, p.60) is for positivism; or the "surrounding world" for phenomenology, which the interpretive paradigm feeds on. That surrounding world, constantly seen as the background, the arena, the permanent basis for researchers' subjective mental work, is precisely what enables them to become a topic of reflection (HUSSERL, 1981, pp.139, 166-167). [38]

By means of the Epistemology of the Known Subject, I hereby put forward renewed ontological and epistemological foundations for qualitative research, since the ontological proposal of such epistemology is grounded in a different conception of identity. Such conception reaches out to the various subjects that participate in cognitive interaction. [39]

Having, thus, shifted the focus of attention, the debate no longer aims at social reality, its nature and characteristics, the conditioning factors it is subjected to and/or subjects, at the laws regulating it or according to which it develops or evolves, the way in which it is constructed, nor the assumptions of how it can be known in valid terms. Neither does it attempt to account for the multiple constructions produced in relation to this reality. Those questions are answered in different ways by the paradigms I spoke of in second section dealing with epistemological reflection and its objectives. [40]

It could also be argued that it is the interpretive paradigm that adequately answers, in particular but not exclusively, the requirements of the secondary characteristics of qualitative research, that is, those focusing on the study of contexts and social situations. To that effect, this paradigm leaves out the model of natural sciences, and gives an account of the constructed feature of meanings, norms, orientations, production, and reproduction of the social world through social practices, among which language is to be found. [41]

The interpretive paradigm is, then, the foundation of qualitative research within the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject. In keeping with that kind of epistemology, the approach to the known subject is mediated, in general, by a veil woven from theoretical representations of that "other" in the various disciplines, and in relation to the current paradigmatic trends which, more often than not, coexist in the various contexts and moments in which knowledge production operates. [42]

It is the person and his/her identity that the Epistemology of the Known Subject deals with, assuming, as I claimed when dealing with Meta-epistemology, the presence of a complementary relationship with the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject. In this way, while studies based on this epistemology, that is, on the different paradigms that operate in social sciences, were interested in marking the differences between individuals and groups by classifying and ranking them according to those concurrent differences, the Epistemology of the Known Subject understands that those differences make up exclusively the existential aspect of identity and that singling them out must, inevitably, be accompanied by the indication of the essential, common aspect of that identity². [43]

Acceptance of the principle of essential equality is a necessary condition for cognitive interaction to take place in the research process, and without that interaction cooperative knowledge construction cannot occur. [44]

The path of epistemological reflection leads us, in this way, first from the object to the subject and then from the different subject to the same, but different subject or, what amount to the same, from the existential component to the two components of identity. In other words, it leads us from the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject to the Epistemology of the Known Subject and from the latter to meta-epistemology, because both identity components must be known without either of them being left out. [45]

6. Cognitive Interaction

For the Epistemology of the Known Subject the relationship between this subject and the knowing person is egalitarian. This statement represents a challenge to the traditional ways of knowing since for them knowers know insofar as they apply the rules, notions and strategies of the so called "scientific knowledge." These, in general, are not shared by their interlocutors and cannot therefore be questioned and/or revised by them, and, which is worse, they usually prevent them from manifesting themselves, from displaying their identity, especially when what they think they *are* or *are doing* does not coincide with the knowing person's expectations, which are derived from his previous cognitive resources. If this is so, how can the participant actors prevent his identity from being denied, distorted, or ignored? [46]

According to Jonathan POTTER (1996, pp.217-218), the ideas and terminology of social sciences provide a wide range of resources to create views of the world that far from having an abstract representation objective, relate to that world, assess it, support some changes in it and neglect others. The danger of such technical versions is that they may, inadvertently, reinforce and uphold some actors' world views and overshadow others'. In this fashion, social researchers have to consider the consequences that their theoretical background, which take certain descriptive social categories for granted, may bring about. [47]

2 Further examples of qualitative research applications of this epistemology premises can be found in VASILACHIS DE GIALDINO (2007a).

Thus, from the perspective of the Epistemology of the Known Subject, questions such as the following could be asked: who is being talked about, referred to, and named by categories and, concepts such as "worker," "unemployed," "marginal," "poor" or "single parent." Those categories which talk about many in general and no one in particular, are, nevertheless, present at the moment of posing a research question, interacting with "others," interpreting their actions, textually representing their identity, and presenting the findings. Likewise, accepting the current value of certain theories that "'establish' the relevance of class, gender, race, etc. by theoretical fiat instead of through an attention to the categories that are endogenous to specific, naturally occurring social relationships" (BERARD, 2005, p.215). So, names construct and reify human bonds and social divisions, are rooted in actions and give rise to specific practices (CHARMAZ, 2006, p.396). [48]

So, it is necessary to ask oneself how stereotypes constructed around the research participant actors influence their identity, their capacity for action and decision. These stereotypes are constructed following scientific knowledge instructions that lead into grouping the similar within the different and into categorizing, then ranking, assessing those differences in relation to an order which is, later on, reproduced in daily interaction. [49]

A serious reflection on such aspects enables the avoidance of the ontological distortion of those actors' identity. Consequently, people who carry out an inquiry in which some "other" participates will have to question themselves on *who* they want to know, what they think they know about that person, on the origin of that knowledge— for instance, academic, experiential, the mass media—and, very particularly, on the place, the value, and the relevance they will assign to the knowledge with which that person provides them. [50]

Given the egalitarian relationship between the knower and the known, the new ways of knowing proposed by the Epistemology of the Known Subject are not those characteristic of the knowing subject, but of both subjects in cognitive interaction. Because the common identity component determines that those two subjects have the same capacity for knowing, it is the knowledge arising from that shared capacity that acquires pre-eminence. There will be specific, technical, particular knowledge some may be lacking in, but there is, besides, knowledge shared by everyone alike. For example, that which enables people to know they are equal in essential identity to other people and, therefore, in dignity, or that constitutes grounds for people's reluctance to let their identity be distorted. Were this not so, the unfairness deriving from disregarding that equality could hardly be recognized. [51]

What brings the knowing and the known subjects together in cognitive interaction, in which they are identical, is what makes communication possible. In communication: 1. both subjects are in one and the same way engaged in dialogue although remaining existentially different from each other, 2. the fusion of the common identity component operates, 3. what people differ in yields to what they identify with and, hence, 4. participants jointly broaden and deepen their knowledge about the other, about the capacity and the ways to know, about

the process of knowledge and about themselves, in relation to what is identical to both subjects. [52]

It is the contact with "others," sharing their time, situations, relationships, hopes, achievements, and misfortunes that makes us modify our ways of knowing. But especially, what changes them is attentive listening in the certainty that what is conveyed to us as their truths are no less important than ours. Only the mark of humility in dialogue that heeds "affinities or similarities, as well as alterity or differences" (SAUKKO, 2002, p.254), enables the participant actors' identity to be discovered, since the more researchers think they know all about them, the less that identity will be revealed. If the researcher considers them different, belittled in their capacity and ways of knowing, he will not be able to find that he is identical to each *one* and in that identity, in that sameness, find himself. [53]

So, new ways of knowing entail knowing through what is common in identity, through shared identity, through its essential component. On that account, ontological considerations come before epistemological and methodological ones. That is why we must deal with the question about *who* is known before the one about *how* it is known. That is why it is necessary to ask ourselves what identity of the known subjects is being assumed, what concepts they are being approached through and to what theories, set in which paradigms, those concepts belong. *It is not about simply establishing theory limits, what is to be considered is the being's unlimited nature shown in communication.* [54]

Hence, there is a requirement to avoid "theoretical interference" that may hinder spontaneous, or fresh understanding (LE VASSEUR, 2003, p.418). Hence the openness of the listeners, of the receivers. Hence the need for acknowledgment of their own biases, their own deficiencies, but, at the same time, of that shared element which enables both to "understand each other." This understanding is relational, existential (SCHWANDT, 1999, p.457), but above all, internal, from one to the other and from the other to the one, in what is equal to them and takes place in a kind of communication where previously heard voices, accounts, versions, and multiple representations of that "other" have to be silenced for their voice to become the first sound and their face the main element recalled. [55]

Most of the social theories presuppose differences between individuals and groups, and as ways of considering and thinking (TURNBULL, 2002, p.318), they channel the attention, organize experience and categorize, conceptualize and systematize it. Knowing through theories may, therefore, jeopardize communication and the egalitarian relationship, because no hierarchy, rank, order, privilege, or subordination taken as true in these theories or outside their scope should mediate the link between the knower and the known. Notions, concepts, and explanations provided by theories prove, many times, to be vacuous, hollow, inert, or dumb faced in respect of the utterances with which women and men narrate their existential vicissitudes and causally link different events, in turn creating theory themselves. [56]

7. Cooperative Knowledge Construction

Qualitative research is nourished, mostly, by the different nature of the information provided by the people participating in the inquiry. Resorting to the knowledge of "others" and the validity of the collected data is usual practice in social sciences, whether taken, for example, from surveys or interviews. This situation talks about a feature of the knowledge process which the Epistemology of the Known Subjects highlights: the cooperative knowledge construction that states that dissimilar ways of knowing produce equally legitimate knowledge. Knowledge that subjects know with and know "themselves" as equals in cognitive interaction with is not limited to the existential aspect of identity, nor to the human beings' work, relationships, expressions, or productions. Based on what people have in common, that is, on essential identity, this kind of knowledge empowers, makes human communication possible and this is the case because it expresses and interprets the two identity components at a time. [57]

Consolidated ways of knowing, focusing on the subject that knows, have given priority to existential characteristics of identity, laying the stress on what is factual, observable, accessible to sensitive register and which has a validity that can be proved. However, what would be the sense of coming up to people with questions inquiring about what can be apprehended by simply resorting to observation? What the Epistemology of the Known Subject is about, then, is recognizing the limitations of those traditional ways of knowing and showing the need for the open-mindedness of the researcher to the plenitude of what can be perceived in a different way. Communication between subjects of cognitive interaction is, thus, a suitable means to express the essential and existential components of identity, or what amounts to the same, to show, at the same time, what a person is equal to all the others in, that is, his "shared humanity" (ANGEN, 2000, p.388) and what he is unique in, different from all others. [58]

Facing a researcher is, then, not a different "other," but an equal "other," but also different from the ones who understand, for they share the same humanity. He is one and the same with him or with her, and in that being the same, all distance, hiatus, and separation, which, in a moment, were the conditions for the objectivity of knowledge are surmounted. The dialogue that the researcher strikes up represents, at the same time, an encounter with his self, and an appeal for his own understanding to be suspended in that dialogue, for that "other" to be manifested and expressed, as he/she expects, wishes, to be understood. [59]

If in such communication a researcher is not grounded in the essential dimension of identity, as is the case in the usual ways of knowing, he is bound to construct the human beings he interacts with according to the measure of observable objects and, although he may question them when external observation is not enough, he is also likely to register the differences rather than the common features that identify him with the others, since the difference is, in general, what he has become used to perceiving on approaching the "others." In this fashion, for instance, "poverty and destitution are not properties of the "other" but the

ways in which this other appears, involves me, and acquires proximity"
(LEVINAS, 1987, p.31). [60]

Without the acceptance of the common component of identity, neither cognitive interaction nor cooperative knowledge construction will be possible, and hopes, needs, claims, questions and proposals of those "others" will hardly be understood. Simply because, as is usual, their actions are not liable to interpretation through the common dignity bringing both subjects of cognitive interaction together, but through the alleged difference separating them. [61]

When those differences are not tolerated and are marked as significant where essential equality should have been stressed, that is, when those differences become essential, scientific knowledge appears to be contributing to the strengthening of discriminatory processes. An example of this is when poverty is associated with crime, or unemployment to a lack of suitable capacity to meet market requirements, reproducing, in this way, the deterministic model of natural sciences and, consequently, taking for granted causal relationships prescribed by general laws that are supposed to enable prediction and phenomena control. [62]

7.1 Common-union

Acknowledgment of the *common-union* of subjects of cognitive interaction characterizes the Epistemology of the Known Subject: *common* because they share the essential component of identity, *union* because what they share brings them together, identifies them as people and allows them to, jointly, construct knowledge cooperatively during such cognitive interaction. In such interaction, as stated, two subjects, essentially equal, make different contributions derived from their same capacity of knowing and their own biography, circumstances, struggles and achievements of their own existence. [63]

Validity of knowledge resulting from cooperative construction does not therefore match that of the so called scientific knowledge, because it is not its norms, rules, directions, and methods that must be applied, followed, and obeyed to enable that construction. The attained knowledge, being of a different nature, lies in a different legitimacy, a legitimacy conferring a scope, depth, development, magnitude of its own. That kind of knowledge, to be valid, must account for the two components of identity at the same time, that is, focusing on what is common to all, it must be able to display the differences without essentializing them and without turning them into the axis of cognitive interaction. Such differences constitute nonessential features that do not represent people's integrity nor do they have any bearing on their dignity. [64]

Would extolling the differences to the detriment of equality not enable those self-appointed "knowers" the use of an advantage given by those differences which, in part, they have contributed to consolidate? Likewise, does acknowledging the equal knowing capacity, common to all human beings, not jeopardize the foundation of the pedestal that so called "science" stands on? [65]

However, does questioning that equal capacity for knowing not attack the validity of the produced knowledge as a consequence of resorting to the information "others" provide us with? Why should we collect their stories? Why should we ask them about the meaning they assign to their actions? Why should we appeal to them to understand the situations they live in, the processes they go through? [66]

On the other hand, even from the assumption of attempting theory creation, researchers frequently resort to the current theories of different disciplines, first to lead their research question and then to be assisted in data interpretation, or to show the pertinence of their findings. This appeal to theories constitutes a threat for both cognitive interaction, as already stated, and for cooperative knowledge construction. So much so that, for example, if researchers assume social reality is subjected to some sort of normativity, of law and that, in consequence, the autonomous capacity of the person's will is constrained, determined, or conditioned, what value will they ascribe to the subjective meaning actors assign to their actions? Will they consider that the actors' words will provide them with some knowledge they lack? Will they account for such actors' proposals and/or possibilities of modifying their situation in a different sense from the one foretold by theories, whose regularities researchers take as truths? [67]

Reflection on the answers to these questions enables a recognition of the obstacles researchers often, and even unintentionally, raise to cooperative knowledge construction. This cannot be attained while they believe that only some, and in particular theory creators, scientists, and philosophers, may understand the sense, the destiny of mankind in the world, and of the person in society. [68]

7.2 The violence of the interpretation code

For cognitive interaction and cooperative knowledge construction to take place it is necessary to bear in mind that different theories do not constitute a mirror in which people's identity and life in society is reflected. Those theories have their own ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions and, if we incorporate the concepts of these theories cognitively, the subjects who are to be known will be observed, and their actions interpreted, along the line of those assumptions. In this way, for example, depending on whether the theoretical orientation of the researcher feeds from Georg SIMMEL's (1939) or from Robert CASTEL's (1995; CASTEL & HAROCHE, 2001) contributions, their views on: 1. poor people, 2. their rights, 3. poverty situations, 4. the possibilities of facing and overcoming them, will be different. The weight of notions and categories with which the knowledge of the "other" is attained is, in general, so strong that it does not just hinder access and recognition of the common aspect of identity, but it also overshadows it, darkening the differences between individuals and groups, as well. [69]

In these cases cooperative knowledge construction does not take place because inquirers, far from allowing the participant actors' manifestations and expressions of their own knowledge, try to explain them, interpret what they observe, listen to

or read "data" with codes which are alien to those of the people whose actions they try to understand, imposing on them the violence of a code, a narrative, or a law they do generally not know, nor consider guides their actions. This *violence of the interpretation code* imposes a "view" of the "others" on them and with it, an image of their identity, of what they are, can and, more often than not, must be and do. It predicts a destiny for them, it shows them their possible and impossible goals and the various possibility conditions. Very little is finally known, on that account, about the destiny they aspire to and about what women and men look for and dream on a daily basis, although much is said about those other destinies, the so called "historical" ones, that are so often none other than the expression of certain individuals' desire to condition the future action and decision of others. [70]

The proposition stating that "a concept is not just an interpretive hypothesis but the translation of the very movement of the world" is, for Jean BAUDRILLARD (1983, pp.45-47) pure metaphysics. Concepts used to know, although critical at first, once established as universal cease to be analytical, and the religion of sense begins. They become canonical and enter the general system in theoretical reproduction mode. Scientific, universalizing discourse, code, therefore turns imperialistic: every possible society must stick to its guidelines. [71]

I will now give an example to show how the ontological and epistemological principles I propose for qualitative research operate. [72]

8. An Example: Representation of Young People Regarded as Linked to Criminal Acts in El Salvador's Written Press

8.1 The inquiry

This qualitative research tried to answer the following question: what are the interpretive models underlying the construction of social representations of the identity of the young people that El Salvador's written press associates with criminal acts? The inquiry (VASILACHIS DE GIALDINO, 2007b) was grounded in the principles of the Epistemology of the Known Subject, and followed an interdisciplinary perspective I call sociological and linguistic discourse analysis (SLDA). The interesting feature of this perspective lies in it examining the resources and strategies used in oral or written texts to impose, uphold, account for, and propose a certain interpretive model of social reality. Those interpretive models are cognitively grounded, mostly, in the various epistemological paradigms I defined earlier (Section 2). [73]

The inquiry was carried out at two time periods. The first stage generated a corpus of data (*Corpus 1*) that consisted of 84 items of news that were published between 27th December 2002 and 17th February 2003, all dealing with the topic of violence in general, and with young people associated with criminal acts in particular. The news articles were published in "La Prensa Gráfica" (LPG) and "El Diario de Hoy" (EDH), the two most widely spread daily newspapers in El Salvador, and in the evening newspaper "El Mundo" (EM), from El Salvador [74]

The second stage corpus (*Corpus 2*) consisted of 182 items of news on the same topic and from the same media along with articles from the "Co Latino" (CL) newspaper. The news articles were published between 7th May 2003 and 17th February 2004. The prevailing news items related to: 1. the so called *Plan Mano Dura* [Heavy-hand Plan], announced by President Francisco FLORES to "fight the maras" with the help of the Army; 2. his proposal for an "anti-mara law," setting up a special and temporary regime, passed by the *Asamblea Legislativa* [Legislative Assembly] on 10th October 2003, and 3. the modification of the law and the proposal, dating 16th February 2004, of a new law with a special regime, but, in this case, permanent. The texts of those laws were also part of the corpus. [75]

The strategies and linguistic resources examined were derived inductively from the study of the corpus, being those significantly and repeatedly used in the news, in particular, with argumentative functions. Among them are the categorization processes, characterization, different ways of representing social action, and metaphors. [76]

8.2 The findings

One of the most salient features of the news in *Corpus 1* is that the information it gives has been provided by the police "authorities," so that the prevailing interpretive model is the current one in that institutional discourse. In *Corpus 2* the same model is used in the reproduction of President FLORES's texts appearing in the newspapers, whose statements are thematically and argumentatively connected with those of police origin (LEUDAR, MARSLAND & NEKVAPIL, 2004, p.252). Recontextualization of police members' and President FLORES's discourse in the written press restates, in this way, an interpretive continuity (HALL, SARANGI & SLEMBROUCK, 1999, p.541) in different moments and in relation to a specific discourse order that reproduces hierarchies, divisions, and social inequality. [77]

Only one in ten pieces of news out of the 266 in the entire corpus made reference to alternative interpretive models. These are models intended to bring about a change in the horizon of meaning (HABERMAS, 1990, p.88), problematizing truth, normative correctness and the truthfulness of the validity criteria of speakers' following the prevailing model. [78]

I will compare, then, the prevailing model with the alternative interpretive models present in the entire corpus, so as to determine the main contrasting features of both types of models.

1. *Categorization*: in the prevailing interpretive model, throughout the whole corpus the most frequently used ways to categorize young people associated in the news with criminal acts are: *pandilleros* [gangsters] and *mareros* [people belonging to a *mara*]. The acts of killing, crime, murder, and criminal activities are circumscribed to those categories (SACKS, 1992, pp.241, 249). The word *mara* was used in El Salvador to mean a group of friends, but it then acquired a deprecatory meaning and is today used to refer to a group of

organized youngsters who are linked to crime. The *maras* do not constitute criminal organizations per se, and it is poverty, unemployment, and/or social exclusion that lead young people into joining them. In the alternative interpretive models one group of young people is not different from the other and "youth," "adolescence," "childhood" are the terms used. Young people are not categorized by their inclusion in certain groups, nor by the activities they have or may have engaged in, nor is youth associated with violence.

2. *Characterization*: in the prevailing model the difference between "them" and "us" is stressed. Characterization refers to both actions predicated on young people being associated with criminal activities and actions attributed to them using certain terms, "criminality" and "violence" in particular (LPG, January 15, 20 and 27, 2003). The construction of that difference is linked to the need for the application of special rules (LEUDAR & NEKVAPIL, 2000, p.495). In the alternative interpretive models no differences between groups of young people are pointed out, rather, they are all equally regarded as respectful of current and common societal values.
3. *Culpability*: in the prevailing interpretive model, culpability, as well as dangerousness, is assumed in relation to *mareros* and their "rivals," and this guilt is opposed to "citizens' innocence," these citizens being those who might become their future victims (EDH, January 15, 2003, LPG, January 20, 2003). The innocence/guilt opposition mirrors the metaphor of center/periphery and, consequently, the presupposed difference between "them" and "us." In alternative interpretive models assumptions of culpability and dangerousness are not present in relation to young people associated with criminal acts.
4. *Causes*: for the prevailing interpretive model "violence" is a typical characteristic of those youngsters, along with "irrationality" and "madness" (LPG, January 15 and 20, 2003). Those characteristics are presented as essentialized and, therefore, irreversible and unmodifiable (LPG, February 10, 2003). For the alternative interpretive models the causes of violence are not subjective nor individual, but social and structural like, among others, the lack of educational options, in particular, (LPG, January 29, 2003) and of opportunities, in general, (LPG, February 10, 2003) together with poverty (LPG, February 15, 2003) and discrimination (EM, February 15, 2003).
5. *Regulation*: for the prevailing interpretive model, since the causes of violence are subjective and the value of security prevails over that of dignity, the solution lies in an increase in control and repression. For the alternative interpretive models it is dignity which has to be privileged. From this perspective, on 2nd April 2004 the Supreme Court of Justice, choosing dignity over security, declared as unconstitutional the "*antimaras* law," which saw the very fact of belonging to a "gang" (*pandilla*) (Art. 6) as a crime. The day before, the Legislative Assembly had supported a new version of that law for a period of three months. [79]

It can clearly be seen, then, how the media repeat the rhetoric of the police and President Flores about the "violence" of young people being linked to criminal acts, and how, on picturing them as "different," the media carry out violent actions themselves by essentializing those young people's so considered existential

differences and denying, as a consequence, the principle of essential equality. In this way, they are left symbolically out of participating, as free and equal, in the processes that construct society. [80]

This media and rhetorical violence, not usually seen as such, is exercised by subjecting "others" to categorizations, stigmatization, stereotypes, assessments, and characterizations they cannot challenge. The fact that such an act of identity deprivation is not seen as violent prevents their doers from recognizing it and, hence, from avoiding its practice. And on the other hand, this kind of violence prevents those enduring it from having the possibility, much as they may claim their right to be protected or defended from it, of incorporating their resistance practices into their life-world as part of a new and renewed alternative interpretive model. [81]

The assumptions of the Epistemology of the Known Subject that guided this qualitative research enabled me to, among other things: 1. compare the prevailing interpretive models with the alternative ones, examining how the former essentialized the existential identity characteristics to justify control and repression, and how the latter extolled dignity over security to protect equality and freedom; 2. point out discriminatory discursive strategies operating both, when the essential, common, component of identity is disregarded and/or denied, and when the existential difference far from being tolerated, is rejected; 3. show the new forms violence adopts; 4. set up the close link between the construction of social representations and identity, and 5. reflect on the similarities and differences of the various discourse orders: scientific, philosophical, judicial, journalistic, in relation to the construction of the identity of "other," and its potential influence on the possibility of historical action, be it either individual or collective. [82]

9. Final Considerations

This paper might, then, conclude with one question among the very many posed throughout the text: why should the Epistemology of the Known Subject be accepted as the ontological and epistemological foundation of qualitative research? [83]

In the first place, it is necessary to highlight that, since it is people that the primary, fundamental characteristics of qualitative research orbits around, the acceptance of the ontological rupture of identity enables to grasp, at the same time, its two components: the essential and the existential one. That is, to have access, on the one hand, to what is common, identical, thus enabling communication between the knowing and the known subjects and making cognitive interaction and cooperative knowledge construction possible, and, on the other hand, to grasp what is different, what makes for every person's uniqueness. This ontological rupture enables the avoidance of the remnants of realistic ontology, so frequent in the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject, even if the interpretive paradigm is assumed and qualitative research carried out.

- It is, then, about knowing "with" the "other" and not "about" the "other," about being one and the same with him or her, based on the shared component of identity; about leaving out separation, the otherness that separates the knower and the known and that turns them into "objects," much as their "subjectivity" as a knower may have been appealed to.
- It is about making the total manifestation of those "others" possible, about not exercising first, cognitive and then ontological violence against them, imposing an interpretation code they would have never resorted to, to account for the meaning of their actions.
- It is about acknowledging that choosing one and/or the other paradigm, one and/or the other epistemology is bound to condition the whole research process: from the purpose to the inquiry question; from the methodological strategies to data analysis, from textual representation of the findings to the assessment of the research quality.
- It is about avoiding the (un)ethical consequences of situations where researchers who, having to display 'two faces' at the same time, become overwhelmed by the requirements of so called scientific knowledge, and consequently change their ontological and epistemological assumptions in the passage from data collection to the writing of the final report.
- It is about those researchers not giving up the principle of equality to lay stress on the differences.
- It is about their overcoming any distance and avoiding being trapped in the epistemological dualism with which "objectivity" is associated.
- It is about preventing the knowledge producers from denying not only the essential identity of the participant actors but also their own, by disregarding the shared feature of their humanity, which makes them one and the same, which identifies them and which is the reason for every person's dignity and, on that account, of that of both subjects of cognitive interaction. [84]

Is it not the case, then, that knowledge produced in the interaction with "others" acquires a different entity and relevance from the one produced by a subject faced with an object that is asked about but cannot itself be asked, that is constructed but it is not possible to construct with, that is known about but does not share with the knower the same knowing capacity? [85]

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