Journal of Economic Issues

ISSN: 0021-3624 (Print) 1946-326X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/mjei20

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To cite this article: Alexander Lenger (2019) The Rejection of Qualitative Research Methods in Economics, Journal of Economic Issues, 53:4, 946-965, DOI: 10.1080/00213624.2019.1657748

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00213624.2019.1657748

JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC ISSUES
Volume LIII No. 4 December 2019
DOI 10.1080/00213624.2019.1657748

The Rejection of Qualitative Research Methods in Economics

Alexander Lenger

Abstract: The article analyzes the status quo of qualitative methods in economics. While a majority of economists consider knowledge of empirical research methods to be of considerable importance, it must be noted that qualitative research methods are scarcely implemented in economic publications. Given all the advantages of qualitative research methods, the reasons and processes responsible for the rejection of qualitative research methods in economics must be empirically identified and further discussed. To gain insights into the perception and application of qualitative research methods in economics revealing the status and representational patterns in qualitative social research. I addressed professors, editors of economic journals, and postdocs from Germany to access economists' functional orientations and interpretative patterns, in order to establish preliminary indicators with regard to the subject-specific perspectives and the underlying scientific conceptions of economists. My findings reveal a fundamental rejection of qualitative research methods in economics due to methodological critique, a nomothetic world view and missing career opportunities. The article intends to initiate a discussion about the missing opportunities of the methodological contraction in the economic profession.

Keywords: qualitative research, sociology of economics, methodological questions

JEL Classification Codes: A14, B41

This article analyzes the status quo of qualitative methods in economics.[1] To gain insights into the perception and application of such methods I conducted an explorative survey of economists from Germany revealing the status and representational patterns in qualitative social research. The goal of the article is to provide an explanation for the persistent rejection of qualitative research methods in economics and to initiate a discussion about the missing opportunities of the methodological contraction in the economic profession.

Originally, the field of economics was a sub-discipline of the social sciences. It was only in the years following World War II that economics transformed into a "social physic" (Mirowski 1989) and that mathematical economics became the field's dominant theoretical approach (Blinder 1999; Weintraub 2002). Accordingly, the Princeton economist Alan

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[1] The research was conducted together with Jan Kruse who passed away unexpectedly in 2015. Two other papers using the empirical data but focusing more on the research logic of qualitative research have been published earlier.

Blinder refers, occasionally critically, to a "mathematical race": "By the 1960s and 1970s, economics had been completely transformed into a technical discipline with all the trappings of science. Nowadays, all economics journals are replete with theorems and proofs, statistical estimation of parameters, and hypothesis testing. Indeed, some have claimed that economics is now more mathematical than physics, and nontechnical economics writing has been virtually banished from the academy." (Blinder 1999, 143)

As a result of these developments, it has been repeatedly maintained that economics should not simply identify and analyze scientific laws, but that there is need for a more pragmatic form of economics, to analyze social relationships and human activity, thus gaining insight into market processes and the economic system as a whole (e.g., Lawson 2003, 343). It is in this context that there has been a great deal of intensive and critical discussion concerning both the methodological spectrum of economics (Dow 2007; Swann 2006; Goldschmidt and Szmrecsanyi 2007, Colander 2008), and economists' views with regard to teaching and research (Frey and Eichenberger 1993; Caplan 2001; Colander 2006, 2008; Freeman 2010; Heise and Thieme 2016). In Germany, for instance, a survey of members of the German Economic Association found that nearly sixty percent of the economists surveyed considered an interest in and knowledge of empirical research methods to be very important traits in a good economist (Frey, Humbert, and Schneider 2010, 325). However, this evidence must be interpreted with great caution: Empirical research methods—as the following study will demonstrate—are derived from a strictly quantitative understanding of things like standardized methods and inferential statistics, which require a high level of mathematical competence and the ability to think abstractly.[2] The explanation for this lies in the strong dominance, or relevance, of the neoclassical research paradigm, which is advocated by four fifths of all economists surveyed, and in the strong support for the *homo oeconomicus* model, which—in spite of a great deal of criticism and empirical results to the contrary—is favored by two thirds of the economic scientists surveyed here (Frey , Humbert, and Schneider 2010, 318–320).

If it is to be argued that a majority of economists consider an interest in and knowledge of empirical research methods to be of considerable importance, then this claim is based on the conception of quantitative methods which determines the methodological canon in modern economics. Qualitative research methods,[3] on the other hand, are scarcely implemented in economic publications. An overview of the most relevant introductory works published in German on the methods used in empirical economic research (e.g., Winker 1997, 2007; Moosmüller 2004; Hübler 2005; Ronning 2011) shows that the reconstructive approach plays nearly no role in mainstream economics (*see also* Piore 2006a or Schlüter 2010). The

[2] Additionally, it should be noted that almost thirteen percent of all German professorships in economics are occupied by individuals whose first academic degree was in the field of mathematics, not economics. (Heining, Jerger, and Lingens 2008, 316).

[3] This work considers qualitative methods to be reconstructive approaches based on elements such as structured interviews, group discussion, or participatory observation. For a fundamental understanding of qualitative research, Ernst von Kardorff's definition is used: "The common element in the various research traditions may be defined as follows: Qualitative research takes as its starting point the attempt to approach, in a primarily interpretative and meaningful manner, social reality, which is interactively 'created,' and conceived of as being represented by both linguistic and non-linguistic symbols. Considerable effort is spent in formulating as detailed and complete a picture as possible of the accessible sections of reality. To be avoided, wherever possible, are methodological preconceptions which might limit or rationalistically 'halve' the potential sphere of experience. The conscious perception and integration of the researchers themselves, and their communication with those being 'researched', as a constitutive element of the process of comprehension, is a further characteristic common to all qualitative approaches: The researchers' interactions with their 'objects' are systematically considered to be the very moments in which the 'objects' themselves are 'produced.'" (Kardorff 1995, 4, own translation).

term "qualitative research methods" is generally understood by economists to refer to the gathering of data which subsequently takes not a numerical, but a verbal form, and which cannot be analyzed econometrically, but only with the help of other techniques (Starr 2014). One motivation for my current research initiative has been the difficulty encountered in publishing papers with qualitative content in journal publications, as well as the skepticism encountered in multiple peer-review assessments with regard to qualitative content (*see* e.g., Bitsch 2000 or Cawthorne 2001).

In contrast to this general evaluation, it should be noted that, in the United States and the UK, some authors have had great success with their qualitative research projects, among them Truman Bewley (1995, 1999), Alan Blinder et al. (1998), Ronald Coase (1937, 1988), Susan Helper (2000), Joshua Lerner and Jean Tirole (2002), Steven Levitt and Sudhir Venkatesh (2000, 2001) and Elinor Ostrom (1990, 2005).[4] As a result, a small number of qualitative research initiatives have been adopted in the research practice of several subsections of economics. Examples of this phenomenon include developmental economics (Cawthorne 1995, 2001), health economics (Coast 1999; Coast, McDonald, and Baker 2004), labor market economics (Piore and Sabel 1985; Hill and Meagher 1999; Lester and Piore 2004), macroeconomics (Blinder 1990, 1991; Blinder and Choi 1990), institutional economics (Menard 2001; Schlüter 2010; Spranz, Lenger, and Goldschmidt 2012), environmental economics (Ostrom 1990, 2005), agrarian economics (Sterns, Schweikhardt, and Peterson 1998; Westgren and Zering 1998; Bitsch 2000; Schlüter and Vollan 2011), feminist economics (Olmstedt 1997; Olson and Emami 2002). In multiple subsections of business administration, too, we can observe the practical implementation and increasing relevance of reconstructive research methods. Convincing examples for this trend include the fields of market research and marketing (Buber and Holzmüller 2009; Naderer and Balzer 2007; Mariampolski 2001), personnel, organization, and controlling (Cassell and Symon 1994, 2004; for conceptual observations see Clark and Fast 2001, 2008), and finances and accounting (Humphrey and Lee 2004; Burton 2007).

In all these cases, the use of qualitative research methods is advantageous, in particular as a result of both the limited predictability and the complexity of human behavior and their potential actions (Simon 1992). Furthermore, problematic contexts can be taken into account which researchers are frequently unable to anticipate (Piore 2006b). Ultimately, the openness of these methods enables the discovery of new, previously unknown situations; that is, it enables a research process which generates hypotheses and creates theories (Bewley 2002). As qualitative surveys are a dynamic process where participants are subject to (almost) no guidelines with regard to how the discussion will progress, a further benefit can be found in the fact that more complete information on the participants' *subjective* perspectives and *subjectively* relevant concerns can be brought to light. This strategy of non-predetermination, a result of open survey methods, thus leads to a high substantial validity, and a greater depth of information (*see also* Lapan, Quartaroli, and Riemer 2012, 4–12).

Given all these advantages of qualitative research methods, the reasons and processes responsible for the rejection of qualitative research methods in economics must be identified and further discussed. Although there is some theoretical conjecture to this end (cf. Piore 1979, 2006a, 2006b; Blinder 1990; Hill and Meagher 1999; Bitsch 2000; Cawthorne 2001; Schlüter 2010; Starr 2014), there exists no empirical findings on the exclusion process of these methods yet.

[4] For a preliminary overview of no fewer than 34 publications with a qualitative approach, see Starr (2014).

Therefore, an explorative survey of experts from the field of economics (professors, editors of economic science journals, and young economists) was conducted to find out more about the representational patterns in qualitative social research.[5] This article intends—in the tradition of interpretative sociology—to access economists' functional orientations and interpretative patterns, in order to establish preliminary indicators with regard to the subject-specific perspectives and the underlying scientific conceptions of German economists. Please note that business administration was not examined in the analysis at hand.

The article is structured as follows: First, I sketch out the research paradigm of qualitative social research and introduce the methodology of my specific investigation. Next, I will highlight the logic of the field of economics and present the corresponding empirical findings. Thereafter, several observations will be made with regard to the extent to which qualitative methods are suitable for contributing to a better understanding of economic processes. Finally, I will summarize the results briefly.

Principles of Qualitative Research

The goal of a qualitative research design is not statistical representativity, but the phenomenological—that is, the thorough and multi-faceted—representation of complex social realities, which are then reconstructed hermeneutically and comprehensively portrayed as patterns (for more detail, see Denzin and Lincoln 2011a; Flick 2014). As a result of both similarities and differences in the social phenomena being investigated, these patterns represent significant structural consistencies. In order to achieve this phenomenological representation on the level of the survey units or cases under investigation, some specific characteristics are a prerequisite when selecting a case study. The fundamental principle when selecting qualitative samples is *contrastability*. The explicit goal is to take the heterogeneity of the field into account (Flyvbjerg 2011, 306–307; Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013, 59, 63). However, such a sample is not achieved through statistical methods of sample creation, but via a *conscious* approach to case selection which operates according to the principle of "maximal structural variation" (Patton 2002, 109)—based methodologically on Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss' (2009) "theoretical sampling." The decisive advantage of this sampling method is the fact that no comprehensive survey is needed: instead, a meticulous analysis of only a few cases can make practical hypotheses a possibility.

Whereas the use of quantitative methods involves the most exacting representation of behavior possible—in the form of models, relations, and numerical representations—as well as the testing of hypotheses, and making predictions regarding further developments in the research object, qualitative approaches are characterized by a much greater level of openness and flexibility in the research process. The informational advantage of quantitative methods can most clearly be seen in data reduction, and in the comparability of the claims, resulting from the structuring and standardization of the survey. This allows researchers to come to (supposedly) accurately quantifiable conclusions, to establish statistical correlations, to achieve a high level of external validity via a large sample, and, finally, to generate both representative results and a relatively high level of comparability (Lapan, Quartaroli, and Riemer 2012, 5–8). Overall, the key techniques in quantitative economic research include the generation of prognoses, the calculation of trends by way of extrapolating the collected

[5] Of course, a second phase will have to include a quantitative survey of economists. However, as the different representational patterns were not immediately recognizable here, a qualitative survey of the various actors in the economic field seemed expedient.

data, as well as the testing of hypotheses. Significant disadvantages of the quantitative research method include the lack of flexibility during the survey process, as the questions are set *ex ante.* Furthermore, quantitative procedures are often ill-suited to establishing the causes for a specific claim; after all, the respondents will not be able to provide feedback or corrections, although this drawback can be reduced by integrating open questions (Lapan, Quartaroli, and Riemer 2012, 9).

The advantages of qualitative methods include—besides the flexibility of this research approach, which can also be adapted to the object of investigation *ex post*—the procedure's capacity to establish new insights and to reveal subjective associations of meaning; its potential both for setting further questions in order to resolve any uncertainties and for the realization of a high level of substantial validity; and, finally, establishing a more detailed degree of information (Holstein and Gubrium 2011, 153–154). One disadvantage of qualitative procedures is the time and cost-intensive survey and evaluation phase, which requires highly qualified interviewers and analysts. Another problem is the fact that universally applicable statements cannot be extrapolated from qualitative data, only representational patterns (the problem of generalizability), which represents one potential limitation of this kind of research per se. Finally, there is also the problem that the initial selection itself can lead to potential misinterpretations and that potential interviewees might refuse to participate.

In a nutshell, the logic of qualitative research takes a different epistemological approach with regard to reality and the processes of perception than the deductive and nomothetic paradigm: whereas the latter focuses on a fundamental objectivist understanding, qualitative research is based on an interactionist understanding of the construction of social reality—that is, beyond individuals' implementation of reality, there is no objective reality "in and of itself" (Garfinkel 1967; cf. also Denzin and Lincoln 2011b).

It is this kind of constructivistic conception of reality which leads, ultimately, to another *instrumental logic*: According to the quantitative research paradigm, an objective depiction of reality can be achieved in circumstances where "measurements" can be taken which are sufficiently accurate (and indeed correct) to achieve the intended goal of this maximally structured and controlled survey process. Qualitative research, however, follows precisely the opposite approach: As the process of the social construction of reality is primarily *linguistic* and *communicative* (Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke 2004, 7), it is also the case that this method of construction can never be objective. This means that language has no objective substance per se; rather, meaning is created only by the actual usage of the linguistic tools themselves. (cf. Garfinkel 1962). This perspective, however, makes untenable the point of view which states that, in sociological surveys which apply linguistic stimuli (i.e., questionnaires), these stimuli cannot be formulated objectively—that is to say, in a way in which all respondents understand them to mean the same thing. As a logical consequence of this, the goal of qualitative logic is not to approach a survey with the expectation of controllable accuracy: On the contrary, each investigation is designed with maximum openness so that the respondents can formulate the meaning of the applied linguistic terms (i.e., concepts) from within their own subjective reference systems (cf. Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke 2004; Flick 2014).

In contrast to the standardized research process, the operational logic and the goals of the qualitative research process do not rest on a concept which has been theoretically formulated a priori, only then to be examined with regard to its frequency distributions and statistical correlations. How could the researcher ever be certain that the concepts he or she

has posited are identical with those of the objects being investigated? Rather, the logic and goals of the qualitative research process are based on the diametrically opposed approach—the analytical reconstruction of the original concepts of the responding (economic) subjects.

Method of the Explorative Survey

To approach the current significance of qualitative research methods in economics, I conducted an *explorative* and *reconstructive* email survey. The intention was to examine this significance in the tradition of the interpretative paradigm. Therefore, I identified the *homologous patterns* in the subjective representation systems in order to assess the significance of qualitative research methods of economists (cf. Bohnsack 2014, 224, 229). In my opinion, this approach enables—despite the narrow focus of its starting point, and the very limited available data—conclusions regarding the dominant semantic representational system in qualitative research within economics.

The qualitative email survey was formulated as follows; after a short introduction, which was deliberately formulated openly in terms of both the research questions and the desired results, thus displaying the typical characteristics of an open-ended stimulus for freely structured text production, there followed several open key questions. Thematic focuses were thus put in place, although they too were of an open nature (see Appendix).

The formation of the sample followed the fundamental principles of reconstructive research: specifically, the principle of *maximal structural variation* (Patton 2002, 109). One fundamental characteristic of qualitative samples is the contrasting of relevant cases from the empirical sphere (deliberately contrasting or comparative sampling). This allows us to implement a broad spectrum of relevant systems, thus factoring in the heterogeneity of the field (cf. Strauss and Corbin 2015).

In my survey, this means that different key actors in the field of economics were approached to form the sample. I included specifically chosen professors from various economic sub-disciplines (I selected representatives from the following fields: theory and neoclassical economics, welfare economics, political economy and constitutional economics, new institutional economics, and—for a different perspective—economic sociology),[6] specifically selected journal editors (again, the direct selection of publishers and editors from economics periodicals), as well as randomly contacted young researchers (who were contacted en masse via several different mailing lists).[7]

[6] There has yet to be, however, a field analysis of the economic sciences which systematically depicts the subject-specific hierarchies between the individual sub-disciplines in economics. For a preliminary, yet fundamental guide to the structure of the university landscape and the mechanisms at play there, see Richard Münch (2014). One indication of the maximal structural variation in the field of economics is given, in my opinion, by the systematic analyses of the presentations given at the annual conferences of the German Economic Association, a sign of the quality of various sub-disciplines of economics (cf. Fabel et al. 2003; Haufler and Rincke 2009). The high visibility of the annual conference means that the number of papers presented there, in various economic sub-disciplines and by specific research institutes, represents a good indicator of their success in the field of economics. Of particular importance here is the fact that the papers presented at the annual conference are selected in a structured process of assessment. Summarizing the findings, it is clear that neoclassical research practically constitutes a monopoly. This tendency is corroborated by various periodicals and economic rankings: cf. Rolf Bommer and Heinrich Ursprung (1998); Pantelis Kalaitzidakis, Thanasis Stengo, and Theofanis Mamuneas 2003; Handelsblatt (2013). I also consider the relevance of the various sub-disciplines to be discernable in the bibliometric measurements found in the Economic Literature (EconLit), the Journal of Economic Literature (JEL), and the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI).

[7] For reasons of data protection, more detailed information cannot be given here.

The response rates were relatively low (only four complete answers, following the guidelines). However, this need not be understood as a deficiency, but in fact as the first of the study's findings. Indeed, I analyzed twelve further reactions from participating economists, which were analyzed, as they included relevant structures of meaning regarding the representational system of the significance of qualitative research methods in economics.

All responses were evaluated, both with a qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000), but also using an interpretative approach in the tradition of the grounded theory (for more information, see Thornberg and Charmaz 2012). Additionally, I analyzed, as complementary and comparative material, five peer-review assessments of previously submitted papers in which the use of qualitative methods had been explicitly commented upon.

The Epistemological Code of the Field of Economics

In the following section, I describe the results of the empirical investigation, identifying the various dominant conceptual and relevance systems therein. Overall, the survey shows that the field of economics is characterized, in particular, by a factual and deductive conception of science as a whole. Empirical research in economics is predominantly quantitative (Cawthorne 2001, 67); that is, the sample has to be quantifiable, consist of a large number of cases, and fulfill the requirements of objectivity (intersubjectivity or neutrality and independence), reliability, and validity (Lapan, Quartaroli, and Riemer 2012: 4–5). This is achieved by way of standardized and rigorous guidelines, thus enabling a level of (supposed) control over the data (Bohnsack 2014). This perspective can clearly be seen in a comment from one editor, who makes explicitly clear, in a personal closing statement, "*that your study will only be able to achieve any relevance, as I see it, if it can be guaranteed that all respondents share a similar understanding of 'qualitative' methods.*"

My central argument, however, is that the field of economics—in adhering to this school of thought—is wasting an opportunity to establish important findings and to formulate more realistic models, as standardized guidelines massively reduce the range of possible empirical conclusions. It should, for example, be recognized that, even in the fields of microeconomics and welfare economics, there is still very little understanding of individuals' utility functions and preferences. Instead, the active individual is modeled ex ante as a rather unrealistic and strictly rational *homo oeconomicus*, a model which can be supplemented as required with theoretical elements such as "bounded rationality" (Simon 1955, 1956), "theories of social preferences" (Fehr and Schmidt 1999; Fehr and Fischbacher 2002) or "extended rationality models" (Margolis 2007) transforming economics into a "quasi rational" science (Thaler 1991).

In my survey, the question of qualitative research methods in economics was deliberately formulated openly, and only specified further on request. In this way, valuable evidence could be collected with regard to the representational systems in empirical research methods which determined the respondents' answers; indeed, the very way in which respondents requested further information indicates that most of the economists surveyed here were scarcely acquainted with reconstructive and interpretative research methods.

Thus, as a central pattern in the respondents' reactions, I find that the initial question about "qualitative research methods" created uncertainty and the desire for further clarification or definition. A case in point for this kind of response would be the uncertainty of one editor, who asked whether *"everything which is not quantitative–purely theoretical analyses, or more empirically-oriented approaches, which are not explicitly quantitative for lack of data–can be*

considered to be qualitative research." One professor of economics formulated his uncertainty as follows: *"I would like to participate, but I don't quite understand what you mean by qualitative methods. Economics, without mathematics and statistics—with no reference to numbers at all?"* Another striking example of this prominent pattern of uncertainty and unfamiliarity in the reactions of the respondents can be seen in the following quote:

> Thirdly, the questions are so unspecific that they practically invite misinterpretation. You will have to further define the actual meaning of 'qualitative' and 'quantitative': the terms are not self-explanatory. What about works which apply model theory? Is the math applied there 'qualitative' or 'quantitative'? What about experimental research? Is any research involving numbers automatically 'quantitative'?

Already, the dominance of the quantitative paradigm is clear; the respondents' requests for clarification are, for the most part, based on ensuring the comparability (that is, the control) of data, to be achieved by applying the quality criteria of quantitative research methods (objectivity, reliability, and validity). Most participants do not take into account the fact that qualitative methods follow a different research paradigm.

"A legitimate empirical survey is something else entirely"

I observe this lack of familiarity with qualitative research methods also in a far more drastic pattern of answers, as typified by this professor's brusque rejection of my method:

> Your email is the perfect negative example of how not to design qualitative research. Why should I take the time to answer your questions, especially in writing? You expect a much greater investment of time than would be the case if you were to carry out an interview—am I supposed to perform the transcription myself?

Here, two things must be noted: First, the answer displays a lack of experience with qualitative interviews, which as a rule—and for the interviewee in particular—are very time-intensive (in my request for responses, I made it explicitly clear that any expertise should be limited to a maximum of two pages, in anticipation of potential difficulties in terms of time). Second, the very content of the question—as my findings confirm—is a relatively "delicate" subject in the economic field, which is why I predicted that the willingness to participate in time-intensive expert interviews would be relatively low.

The pattern of lack of experience in qualitative research methods becomes even more evident in the following quote from one editor:

> In its current form, I could not possibly participate in your survey. Firstly, twenty respondents are too small a sample from which to derive reliable information. . . . Furthermore, it would be far more practical to develop a catalog of questions, so that answers could be given in a standardized format. The whole process seems to me to be very much a case of 'shooting from the hip.' A legitimate empirical survey is something else entirely. This objection is particularly serious, because your very intention is to emphasize the importance of 'qualitative' research; any investigation must then make absolutely clear that the authors understand what it is that they

> wish to contrast 'qualitative research' with. . . . In what way are economists to be integrated into this project, coming as it does from a sociological institution?

This example shows the clearly implied hierarchy between quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as the subject-specific way in which quantitative methods are assigned to economics, and qualitative methods are assigned to sociology. The demands for a quantitative, instead of a qualitative, survey are a result of a monolithic instrumental logic of the field. The quantitative epistemological logic in the response patterns of the participants is neatly exemplified by one editor's suggestion that it would be "*more practical to develop a catalog of questions*."

"Of course, you cannot expect representative results"

As the previous statements have already made clear, one key finding of this investigation is the fact that the response patterns of those surveyed display a strong need for the qualitative methodology I selected to be transformed or re-interpreted into a quantitative research logic; that is, the respondents applied quantitative criteria to my reconstructive survey. This pattern can be observed particularly clearly in the frequent declarations of the survey's lack of representativity (*"twenty respondents are too small a sample"*). Additionally, I note here the following comments from an anonymous peer-review assessment on the topic of the implementation of qualitative data:

> In principle, there should be no objections to the selection of a qualitative research design, instead of the quantitative analyses frequently found in economics. When you consider the 'black box of the communicative process' there is little to be said against the analysis of explorative interviews implemented here. Of course, you cannot expect representative results, but still, certain methodological standards should be adhered to as part of an empirical analysis. One cannot derive universally applicable statements from the anecdotal evidence of the reported quotes (it's like saying, "we've got a customer here who says . . ."). Furthermore, the question arises as to the extent to which this article is genuinely intended to test its own hypotheses—the conclusions and interpretations at the end of the text give the clear impression that it is. However, the entire design of the empirical investigation is unsuited to this purpose, as an empirical analysis of the interviews can only be implemented in formulating hypotheses.

It is in this context that one of the "proponents" of qualitative methods discusses the problems with the reputation of quantitative quality criteria, stating that *"the reservations when it comes to qualitative research methods certainly stem from the fact that they can only analyze individual cases, and that it is thus difficult to reach more generalizable conclusions."*

Responsible for this state of affairs are both, in my opinion, elements characteristic to the field itself and the dominance of the neoclassical research paradigm, with its focus on mathematical methods and econometrics, as well as the accompanying "immunization" of theory. Michael Piore (2006b) considers the rejection of qualitative approaches to be rooted in two characteristic features of the field in particular: First, economics are extremely structuralistic, in the sense that they operate within a very "narrow" theoretical framework

and set of empirical methods. Second, economics is a normative science, with the objective of examining economic processes and suggesting improvements. Welfare economics, in particular, is based on Pareto optimality, which implies a very narrow conception of normativity.[8] On the other hand, economics as a practical science aims to solve actual, clearly defined problems. Neoclassical theory is thus, in essence, based on the assumption that rational individuals follow their own interests in competitive markets, where they communicate prices to one another independently of each other. This theory assumes a universally stable equilibrium, meaning that it tends to apply set-theory analysis to the examination of empirical data.

"Methodologically, the danger of an inductive conclusion remains, if universal statements are to be derived from these examples"

Consequently, another key pattern in the respondents' frameworks of perception could be identified, based on the consistent application of deductive and nomothetic methods of explanation; that is, on the logical deduction of established facts from universal laws and limitations. This process, as in the natural sciences, is intended to generate nomothetic statements which can explain social phenomena. The implicit assumption is that this is also the goal of qualitative methods; testing hypotheses ones with have already been formulated deductively, by way of falsification. Accordingly, in one peer-review assessment, the integration of selected empirical examples from qualitative studies was criticized, as was their conceptual and methodological usefulness. Conceptually, the explanatory utility of the selectively chosen survey examples was classified as being "*of limited usefulness, if they are not supported by a theoretically substantiated hypothesis that can examined using conventionalized facts*." Methodologically, the reasoning continues, "*the danger of an inductive conclusion remains, if universal statements are to be derived from these examples.*"

"There can be hardly any econometricians, at least, who do not recognize the significance of qualitative information in their work"

Looking at the field of economics as whole, it should be noted that there are also several positive patterns of interpretation with regard to the relevance of qualitative research methods. Reconstructive methods are certainly thought of as "*important*", with "*considerable status*", "*with the potential to be considered equal to quantitative methods*." In this vein, one professor particularly emphasizes the potential which qualitative approaches have for generating hypotheses:

> They represent a relevant method for economics, and are important for research on new topics, for describing them from the perspective of 'insiders.'

The question as to which areas of research, which fields and questions in economics are both relevant to and worthwhile for the implementation of qualitative research is often answered, in the response patterns of its proponents, with reference to, firstly, modern institutional economics, in the tradition of North (1990) and Denzau and North (1995):

> When dealing with institutions, it seems to make perfect sense. North starts with the assumption that the development of institutions is strongly

[8] For both a critique and a thorough expansion of this concept in the sense of modern constitutional economics, involving the agreement of the affected individuals as normative reference criteria, see Vanberg (2005).

> influenced by the mental models of the people involved, their ideologies, etc. . . . But first, in order to understand these mental models, to even be able to recognize patterns of thought, we need 'narratives.'

Second, the use of qualitative methods is also quite reasonable in the "traditional" fields of orthodox economics:

> Perhaps our understanding of the development of economic cycles or periods of growth may ultimately be better helped by qualitative data such as 'How does a specific economic climate even emerge?' more so than by using quantitative data.

Also mentioned were more specific and topical issues, such as the behavior of investors in major banks and insurers, or of managers of companies. One participant even stated that he considered qualitative methods to be relevant for "*every sphere of economics*."

One statement which seemed generally noteworthy was that *"the more the question is related to a genuinely existing phenomenon, the more appropriate qualitative methods seem to be"*, referring to one of the central problems of modern economics, namely that economic processes cannot be examined in the controlled surroundings of a real-world experiment (for the problem of external validity see e.g., Shadish, Cook, and Campbell 2002). Overall, the response patterns of the proponents of qualitative methods display a tendency to "*interdisciplinary cooperation,*" that is, there is a desire to supplement quantitative methods with qualitative ones.

"If a student were to come to me for study guidance, I would probably tell him that, if he wanted to make something of himself in economics, qualitative methods are better avoided–if he aspires to an academic career as an economist"

In practice, however, there are several reasons why interdisciplinary cooperation between quantitative and qualitative approaches seems improbable. In the response patterns of proponents of qualitative methods, in particular, the "weaker" position of such approaches in economics as a whole is recognized, and indeed explicitly emphasized; several good examples of this can be found in the descriptions of the experiences young researchers have personally made with qualitative methods:

> Qualitative studies can only get published in journals which deal with peripheral topics in economics, and which are not highly ranked. Hardly any economists are going to be interested in publishing there . . . I haven't even submitted any articles, because there's no chance of getting published.

This assessment is shared by one professor of environmental economics:

> In one of my articles [with qualitative content], I realized that the editor was removing more and more from the qualitative sections of the paper. He just thought they were 'ramblings.' There is very little opportunity for a qualitative economist to publish at all, and certainly not in any of the more prestigious journals.

To show that this descriptive pattern constitutes a generalized representation of the field of economics, here is another quote from an anonymous peer-review assessment:

> As part of the [anonymized] investigation under discussion here, a word by word reproduction of the actual interaction seems unnecessary. It would interrupt the argument's conceptual train of thought . . . It is in this context that we suggest that [the interview passages in question] be supplied in an appendix, and that in the text itself they be replaced with a general reference to the appendix and to secondary literature.

These last two quotes clearly show the lack of familiarity in dealing with qualitative studies; also, both subjective statements correspond to the assertions of many journal editors from my survey who had never been *"confronted"* with qualitative submissions.

"The best opportunity for qualitative work in economics is probably its compatibility with other social sciences"

Conversely, however, this also increases the risk that economics, as a result of its high level of mathematization and formalization, will actually begin to lose its compatibility with other social sciences. As a result, the proponents of qualitative methods emphasize the potential for qualitative research methods and their compatibility with other social sciences: "*in these times of widespread interdisciplinary faculties, this might prove to be our niche.*"

On the whole, the high levels of formalization and mathematization in economics lead us to diagnose a lack of communicative competence—especially towards politics and the general public—resulting in an extremely limited communication of results and findings to outsiders and non-economists. For the successful implementation of practical political recommendations, however, this compatibility is of utmost importance. It is in this context, in particular, that proponents of qualitative social research hope for greater efforts in "translation" or "transference."

Discussion

Thomas Kuhn (1968) has suggested that scientific disciplines are shaped by *scientific communities*, which are themselves based on communal, traditional scientific practices. A scientific community thus consists of those specialists from a specific scientific field who have received the same education and occupational initiation. As a result of the fact that all members of such an "academic tribe" (Becher and Trowler 2001) will usually have read the same academic literature, the limits of this standard literary corpus will also define the limits of the field itself, as well as the field's specific spheres of enquiry and its research methods. In order to ensure each field's individual identity, an exchange of research findings and methods between different disciplines happens only rarely, if at all (Kuhn 1968).

Mainstream economics, which is wedded to the mathematical neoclassical paradigm, today operates under rigorous theoretical assumptions (Weintraub 2002; Boumans 2005; Morgan 2012). According to Blinder (1999, 141, 153) there have been three fundamental changes in economics which have led to the emergence of the neoclassical paradigm, reinforcing the lack of compatibility with other disciplines: (1) the *mathematization* of the discipline, (2) the development and application of *econometrics*, and (3) the growth in the importance of *macroeconomics* as a sub-discipline of economics. In the case of *methodological individualism*—according to which the actions on the micro-level of all the individuals involved in social processes must be taken into account in order to describe and explain these processes

on the macro-level—the theory is, in essence, based on a specific model which aims to predict individual's behavior. The model of human behavior upon which mainstream economics is based consists itself of two key assumptions, both of which demand further inspection: first, the assumption that individuals act according to (full or bounded) rationality (cf. von Neumann and Morgenstern [1944] 2007), and second, the assumption that individuals act in their own interests (cf. for more detail Smith [1776] 2008). These assumptions enable the derivation of two simple patterns of behavior: that people try, first, to behave as rationally as possible when pursuing their goals; second, that people put their own interests first, and will attempt to maximize their own utility by applying the best possible cost-benefit ratio. In transferring these patterns to a mathematical utility function, it is assumed that rational and self-interested persons will try, given certain limitations, to maximize their own utility function. The assumption of rationality is expressed technically via the paradigm of maximization, and the assumption of self-interest is represented by the specific elements of the utility function. Consequently, economic theory, examines the results of this process of maximization, as well as related individual patterns of behavior and the market interactions of the economic actors involved. This often results, however, in subject-specific structures of interpretation, hindering other disciplines in their attempts to utilize the findings and discoveries of economics and to integrate them into their own canon of knowledge.

The qualitative email survey shows that the field of economics displays specific representational patterns. The responses include those which distance themselves from qualitative research, or treat it critically, or take a wholly negative view of it. Above all, there is methodological criticism of the open question structure, which was classified as "*too ambiguous*" or "*too generalized*." There is a desire for clarification and definition, as well as a need for structuring, all intended to reduce uncertainty and facilitate greater control—both with regard to the survey subjects themselves and with regard to the data being generated. The repeated question as to what "qualitative research" actually means might be thought of as representative for the desire to re-interpret the research object itself; it was also suggested that meaningful data could only be gathered in circumstances where each respondent's conception of "qualitative methods" was identical. This is a legitimate objection, at least from a specific—a standardized—perspective, but it misunderstands the original intentions of a "social experiment" (cf. Cook and Campbell 1979), where the object to be reconstructed—here, "qualitative research"—is deliberately left open, in order to observe the reactions of the respondents. The strategies for dealing with this openness—that is, the ways in which the respondents themselves attempt to define this unspecified construct—are thus the raw material for the reconstruction of the conceptions and representations of "qualitative research."

From these patterns, as seen in the preceding sections, we can see attempts to transform the logics at play here into those of the epistemological paradigm of deductive, nomothetic, and standardized research. This methodological transformation of my research approach to one with a "quantitative logic" affects several aspects: the *problem of indexicality* of linguistic stimuli, and, following on from this, the *instrumental logic* of research methods, as well as the classic problem of the *representivity* of qualitative research, especially in the context of the *problem of the inductive fallacy*. This all makes it quite clear that the genuine operational logic of qualitative research is not practiced by the economists I surveyed. Within the field of economics, qualitative research is quantitatively *reframed*, and its operational logic is assessed according to the criteria of standardized research; this is, however, a fundamentally futile

undertaking, as an operational logic can ultimately only be assessed—here, for example, with regard to the quality and "scientificity" of qualitative research—with criteria coming from within the operational logic itself. If these are not present in the representational systems of actors in the field of economics—and this explorative analysis provides clear evidence that they are not—we can formulate the conclusion that qualitative research methods in economics are currently of no significance, and thus that qualitative findings are extremely difficult—or impossible—to communicate.

The difficulty, then, in implementing qualitative methods in research projects in economics is less to be found in the deductive, nomothetic conception of science itself, and instead is more to be thought of—according to my theory—as resulting from the fact that students learning the principles of economics are actually being taught precisely the opposite conception (one need only look at the most popular literature on introductions to methodology), and that they are thus being shaped by a specific and objectivist conception of reality.[9] There are probably multiple factors at work here: First, the fact of the disciplinary dominance of economics within universities, and the resulting disciplinary "isolation" (Fourcade, Ollion, and Yann 2015). Second, a hegemonial dominance of U.S. economics (Fourcade 2006). Third, the dialog with other disciplines has, in the past, certainly been less intense than in the other social sciences, in part as a result of the differences between the *Diplom* and *Magister* teaching programs.[10] (For more on the disciplinary isolation of economics, see Pieters and Baumgartner 2002). Finally, economists see themselves at or near the top of the disciplinary hierarchy (Colander 2005) assuming a "superiority of economists" in contrast to other social sciences (Fourcade, Ollion, and Yann 2015).

Following on from the preceding observations, it should be emphasized that qualitative research methods are suitable for generating practical knowledge regarding the behavior and preferences of economic actors (for a detailed discussion of this argument, see Kruse and Lenger 2013). Accordingly, the contrary argument put forward by Michael Piore should be considered critically: he argues that interpretative material cannot automatically be treated as empirical evidence. Piore sees the benefits of qualitative methods "solely" in their role as a toolkit for creating theories, or for undertaking a critical examination of typical theoretical assumptions, thus enabling the construction of alternative theoretical models (Piore 2006a, 2006b). Starr for example sees the benefits in a combination of qualitative with quantiative methods (Starr 2014).

Consequently, independently of the findings presented here, and as a reaction to the restrictive dismissal of their methods in the economic field, qualitative researchers seem to have developed three potential strategies for presenting qualitative data. First, we can observe a process of pseudo-formalization using computer-aided coding tools such as MaxQDA; second, the quantification of qualitative data, usually referred to as mixed methods research relying mostly on quantifiable content analysis (Starr 2014); third, triangulation, where—in accordance with the principles of division of labor—qualitative research is solely responsible for generating hypotheses, while the data for empirical analyses are gathered solely by way of quantitative methods (Piore 2006a, 2006b). My position, in contrast, is to emphasize the

[9] For more on processes of subject-specific socialization in economics, see W. Lee Hansen (1991); Bruno Frey, Werner Pommerehne, and Beat Gygi (1993) or Robert Frank, Thomas Gilovich, and Dennis Regan (1993).

[10] Until recently in Germany, there were—in academic fields such as economics—typically two forms of university degree, *Diplom* and *Magister*: in the latter, students usually took two minors, subjects which complemented their major, whereas *Diplom* courses had a more narrow focus, resulting in a greater degree of interdisciplinary dialog for *Magister* students.

considerable relevance of the qualitative approach to research, as it has the potential for far more precise empirical statements than is the case with standardized procedures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should once again be noted that this study—as a result of the fact that there is almost no information available regarding the different representational patterns in qualitative research in economics—is an initial, purely explorative data analysis. Further research—both quantitative and qualitative—examining the academic field of economics is required. It can be assumed that due to the general domination of quantitative methods and the neoclassical research paradigm throughout economics, my findings are not limited to Germany, although further research would have to prove this claim.

Nevertheless, I was able to show that, in the field of economics, there exist different, competing representational patterns, which correspond (to a certain extent) to the conflict between quantitative and qualitative research logic in the social sciences as a whole. Initially, this says nothing about the scope and scale of these representational patterns, or their specific types—this would require a quantitative survey, and further qualitative interviews. Rather, the data presented here enables nothing more than a preliminary confirmation *that* these conflicting representational patterns exist, in principle, and of *what* they look like, individually (i.e., what elements they consist of, and in what combinations they become patterns). This does, however, make one crucial point immediately clear, one which must be taken into consideration when making further observations: the statements collected clearly show that although some economists consider qualitative research methods to be applicable to their research object, they forgo the use of qualitative methods—as a result of hierarchies specific to the field (the dominance of the quantitative research paradigm, socialization processes in economics) and of individual strategic calculations (difficulties getting published, their reputation in their field, career considerations)—or they try to re-apply reconstructive findings to the field of economics by way of an appropriate process of quantification.

Recently, an increase in the use of qualitative approaches in economics can be observed, including "mixed-methods" projects which use qualitative and quantitative methods in combination (Starr 2014). One explanation for such an increase might be a shift towards a real-world economics in particular (e.g., Davis 2006; Fullbrook 2007; Lee 2009) and a turn to practice in social sciences in general (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and Savigny 2001). Such a praxeological turn in economics is in need for interpretative research methods since observed behavior cannot simply be traced back to rational behavior. The necessity of a contextual economics (Harvey and Garnett 2011; Goldschmidt, Grimmer-Solem, and Zweynert 2016) or cultural theory of economics (Beugelsdijk and Maseland 2011; Sum and Jessup 2013) has been put forward within the last twenty years and a qualitative approach would fit these real-world analyses very well.

It is my central assertion that economics would be able to generate far more realistic, practical knowledge if researchers were to adhere consistently to a research methodology which was grounded in the object of research itself, making use of qualitative methods as required. With this in mind, I fully agree with Blinder, when he describes the potential of qualitative research methods in economics as follows:

> Stacked up against competition of this caliber from theory and econometrics, the interview method doesn't look so bad after all—especially if viewed as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, more conventional modes of economic inquiry. (Blinder 1990: 298–9)

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Appendix

Dear Mr./Mrs. ___,

We are writing to you as part of the preparations for a journal article on the utility and current status of qualitative research methods in economics: Would you be prepared to take part in a small email survey, and write an expertise based on a few of our questions? We explicitly limit the length of the expertise to two pages, so that you are not overburdened by our request.

We would be most glad if you were to participate. You would be helping in an initial attempt to empirically process the current relevance and usage of qualitative research methods in economics.

We shall be asking roughly twenty experts from different fields of economics—as well as editors and publishers of relevant journals, and young and junior academics—in order to develop a differentiated perspective on the situation. Our results (which will of course be anonymized) will be included in the journal article on this topic, planned for 2011. (We intend to publish the results in the journal *Perspectives in Economic Policy*.)

If you do decide to take part in our email survey, then we ask you to please write your expertise (in digital form) with reference to the following questions, which you may take as a sort of guideline. (You can simply ignore questions which you are unable or unwilling to answer.)

1. What is your personal opinion of the relevance or significance of qualitative research methods in economics as a whole?
2. In which fields and spheres of research, and for which questions in economics, do you consider qualitative research methods to be relevant or productive?
3. What do you believe to be typical reservations regarding the use of qualitative research methods in economics?
4. What problems with regard to reputation do you think researchers using qualitative research methods in economics will have? In this context: How do you view the chances of getting papers using qualitative research methods published?
5. Have you yourself used qualitative research methods in your empirical work? If so, then to answer which questions, and in which fields?

Thank you for your participation!

Yours sincerely,

Jan Kruse and Alexander Lenger