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FEMINIST USE OF QUALITATIVE/INTERPRETIVE METHODS

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Introduction

Examining the evolution of what has been published in *Feminist Economics*, Tejani (2019) finds the proportion of articles employing econometric methods has increased dramatically over the second half of the journal's 20-year record (1995–2015). Even though the number of articles using "qualitative research strategies" doubled during the second period surveyed, "they constituted only 13 percent of the total articles published" (Tejani 2019, 107). Articles on theoretical and methodological issues also decreased significantly. Taking these two trends together, she concludes the "more radical methodological edge [that characterized the earlier period of the journal] seems to have been blunted" (Tejani 2019, 114). From my vantage point as an interpretive methodologist (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012), Tejani's and others' use of the "qualitative-quantitative" binary in economics has conflated elements of research practice—philosophy of science, methodology, and method—that need careful sorting. Such sorting can clarify the distinct possibilities available to those who use qualitative evidence, which can assist feminist economics to recover its "radical methodological edge."

The implicit premise of the qualitative-quantitative binary is that evidence is independent of scholarly activity. This premise hides the complex ways in which research questions—and the very *form* of those questions—logically imply kinds of evidence. What *is* evidence for any particular research project is constituted, in part, by how the research question is formulated. Consider three questions: *What are the economic determinants of intimate partner violence in the states of India? How do Indian women understand the intimate partner violence used against them? Why do women in the Indian state of Kerala experience a lower rate of intimate partner violence than women in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu?* The first question suggests a quantitative data set including, for example, poverty rates, with states as the unit of analysis. The second focuses on the meaning-making activities of women in India, including those with whom they interact in various settings; evidence of *any* form (e.g., discourses among elites, educational materials, interviews) is analyzed in terms of human meaning-making. The third question implies a comparative case study of two states, examined either contemporaneously or over time, but without a single unit of analysis to organize relevant evidence, for example, legal documents, interviews, news reports. This question might be studied either by focusing on discrete causal mechanisms or by treating the cases holistically.

The qualitative-quantitative binary also obscures how questions arise out of philosophical conceptions of "the real" (ontology) and how we might know it (epistemology)—whether these conceptions are consciously embraced or buried in research practices or doctoral methods curricula. The first question here is likely to be formulated by those holding a positivist conception of the world, which dissects phenomena into variables later reassembled into models. The second is more likely to come from an interpretivist one, which emphasizes the holism of lived experience, that is, meaning-in-context (Thomas 2011). The third could come from either orientation.

I examine how qualitative evidence has been used within feminist economics and then review two research traditions that use qualitative evidence: a positivist one, employing cases to uncover causal mechanisms, and an interpretivist one that positions the meaning-making practices of human actors at the center of scientific explanation. These distinctive traditions are erased by the quantitative-qualitative binary that focuses attention solely on evidentiary forms.

The use of qualitative evidence in feminist economics

Literature using qualitative evidence in economics is scant—an unsurprising state of affairs. Economists are not trained in data generation, relying on quantitative data sets produced by others (Basole and Ramnarian 2016). And methodology is understood in terms of choosing data analytic techniques appropriate to quantitative data, as taught in foundational doctoral courses in econometrics. Generally, with no economics courses mentioning qualitative evidence or devoted to methods of generating and analyzing it, graduate students interested in qualitative evidence must access courses in other disciplines that will have their own traditions, which may not fit well with the students' disciplinary needs or may omit particular analytic techniques for qualitative evidence that might prove especially useful to them.

To locate economics research using qualitative evidence, I relied on surveys completed by Starr (2014) and Basole and Ramnarain (2016), both of which briefly describe, in tabular form, articles and books using qualitative evidence as well as the particular methods of data generation employed. Starr has a specific section on feminist economics. Another source was "IDEAS/RePEc Aggregate Rankings for Journals," in which I searched for variations on "qualitative" and "interpretive," as well as specific kinds of methods, such as ethnography. IDEAS is the "largest bibliographic database dedicated to Economics, [indexing] over 3,000,000 items of research" (available at https://ideas.repec.org/). I conducted a close reading of a selection of articles published in *Feminist Economics* and, also, examined methodological articles and texts on how to think about and, to a lesser extent, do such research.

Studies using qualitative evidence

Many, if not most, feminist economists using qualitative evidence have generated it themselves in the field, a striking contrast to mainstream economics where researchers use others' data and rarely interact with human respondents (Berik 1997). And *Feminist Economics*, in particular, has played a key role in publishing field studies from around the world—Tanzania, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Ecuador, among other locations. The research is theoretically sophisticated, evaluating how field evidence supports or challenges basic assumptions in economic theory. As one example, examining women's direct selling in Ecuador, de Casanova's (2011) evidence contradicted assumptions in existing literature that women's market activities would be empowering. Yet feminist economics has come late to the use of qualitative evidence, so there is an opportunity to increase methodological sophistication.

Based on Starr (2014), Basole and Ramnarain (2016) and the articles from *Feminist Economics*, the predominant method of data generation in the field is interviewing, characterized variously as semi-structured or in-depth, some studies including modifiers such as extended, cognitive, or group. A few publications indicate specific interview forms, such as key informant interviews or life histories. Focus groups are also a significant way to generate qualitative evidence, and there are occasional mentions of case study method or analysis of documents.

The meaning of "ethnography" or "ethnographic evidence" is not always clear from feminist economists' descriptions of what they are doing. In some studies, "ethnography" is used as anthropologists or sociologists would, that is, indicating observation (with some degree of participation) for a specified time in a field site or sites. In other articles, going to the field, perhaps a country or a number of cities, to conduct interviews or focus groups is treated as "ethnographic data" even though there appears to be no formal observational component. The confusion may be due to the fact that an ethnography of a particular site, where the primary emphasis is on observations recorded through fieldnotes, also typically includes interviews and examination of documents. However, it is not helpful to equate interview studies conducted in the field with ethnography because the comparative advantage of the latter is observation of social actors in situ. Interviews of any form, as well as focus groups, produce "self-report" data, what individuals think they do, their "espoused values," in contrast to what they actually do, their "enacted values." Ethnographic observations can reveal gaps between the espoused values of social actors and the values they enact in their conduct. The extent of that gap is relevant to public policy, where, for example, the representations by a meat inspector in an interview may differ from his actual practices on the slaughterhouse floor. Loconto's (2015) research in Tanzania demonstrates this point in the private sector. Middle managers and farm workers reported that gender was no longer important in the assignment of job tasks, as in the past, but her observations of gender ratios on factory floors and among management teams contradicted participants' representations.

Another pattern is that feminist economists do not always explain how they record the evidence (say, fieldnotes versus audio files) or how they analyze it. It may be that a systematic analysis has been done, but the form of the analysis was rarely indicated nor were there citations to methods literature. Instead, authors move directly to representation of the evidence in relation to economic theory. For example, the most common form of representing interview evidence is through direct quotations, either in block form or less lengthy ones woven directly into the researcher's description of findings. This approach has advantages. Through the presentation of actual women's voices in their publications, researchers demonstrate the feminist priority to include women in economic research. Kabeer and Khan (2014) quote directly from women in Afghanistan, many of them illiterate, thereby including the views of some of the least powerful actors in that society. Still, in general, in these reviewed articles there seems to be a lack of familiarity with the myriad techniques of data analysis that have been developed to deal with textual evidence, techniques that can reveal different dimensions of human meaning-making (interpretivist-qualitative) or causal connections among events (positivist-qualitative).

Finally, feminist economists rarely reflect on how their identities influenced the research process (e.g., facilitated their access) or findings, even though author affiliation and family name give clues, perhaps unreliable ones. Including such detail in published articles would help economists understand what is involved in these research traditions. Moreover, it would also draw attention to the fact that all data generation begins with some human being's interaction with the social world, whether it is a port official counting the shipping containers to produce data for tracking international trade, the census worker employing a structured instrument to count people,

a UN committee writing a policy document, or a researcher recording fieldnote observations of factory processes. As feminist scholars have long recognized, it is essential to examine who produces evidence. The decisions made about evidentiary forms are ontological ones about what gets included and excluded from economic phenomena, from the GDP to the household. Ramnarain (2016) points out how her fieldwork data (generated in Nepal) provide evidence that cannot be obtained through typical household surveys, which ignore cultural assumptions that make women's agency invisible. More information on Ramnarain's own scholarly identity would be consistent with the feminist philosophers of science she cites, revealing, for example, how she negotiated differences in social class or religion. Over time, such information can help the feminist economic community unpack how researchers' intersectional identities affect access and analysis.

The contribution of feminist economic scholarship is clear. A next step to developing research practice is greater awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of particular forms of qualitative evidence, accompanied by more detailed and consistent reporting of methods of data generation and researcher identity. Another area to be explored is the multitude of data analytic techniques for mining the various genres of textual evidence. Many possibilities can be considered depending on researchers' orientation—positivist or interpretivist.

Methodological reflections on how to do "qualitative research" in economics

Because economic studies using qualitative evidence are relatively rare, so, too, is methodological literature that engages why and how to do such research. Such work has occurred primarily in articles. I identified only two texts, Coast's 2017 *Qualitative Methods for Health Economics* and Radović-Marković and Alecchi's (2017) *Qualitative Methods in Economics*. All of the analyses are tied to the qualitative-quantitative binary.

The use of the binary is problematic because it means authors either conflate the positivist-qualitative and the interpretivist-qualitative traditions or erase one or the other. Pickbourn and Ramnarain (2016) conflate the two traditions. They begin by referencing Lincoln and Guba's (1985) widely known *Naturalistic Inquiry*, a "qualitative approach" from education that is philosophically interpretivist, drawing from the long-standing philosophical traditions of phenomenology (lived experience) and hermeneutics (embracing iterative sense-making, a technique originally derived from biblical interpretation, as in the "hermeneutic circle"). They then move to a detailed discussion comparing the "techniques of qualitative and quantitative research" from a 2006 article by Mahoney and Goertz, which outlines *only* the traditions of positivist-qualitative research in political science. The distinctive philosophical orientations and research practices of these two traditions are not made clear in this article. Starr (2014) follows a similar pattern, citing educator Yvonne S. Lincoln and a coeditor's interpretivist approach to qualitative evidence and then featuring the work of political scientists and sociologists using positivist-qualitative methods.

Interpretivism as a scientific philosophy is recognized rarely in the economics literature with two exceptions. First, Lavoie (2011) analyzes the interpretive dimensions of economic explanation, connecting philosophers in the hermeneutic tradition to von Mises and Hayek. His student, Chamlee-Wright (2011), knows the hermeneutic literature behind "interpretive social science" yet still seeks to operationalize it using "qualitative methods"; she identifies methods, such as ethnography, without clarifying that they may be used from a positivist philosophical position as well as an interpretivist one. Second, Coast's 2017 book recognizes interpretive methods but fails to explicitly name positivist-qualitative ones.

Such conflation or erasure is common wherever the qualitative-quantitative binary is dominant. Obermann, Scheppe, and Glazinski (2013) do not acknowledge the interpretivist-qualitative possibility and, conversely, Jemna (2016) writes about "qualitative research" that is exclusively interpretivist. The study by Radović-Marković and Alecchi (2017) is contradictory in its conflation of terms. To avoid such problems requires clarifying the relationships between philosophy, methodology, and method, spelling out the contrasting philosophical stances of the two traditions, and making clear how those stances translate into methods decisions.

Revealing what the quantitative-qualitative binary hides

Table 14.1 presents terminology to distinguish contrasting forms of research on the qualitative side of the binary. In *philosophy of science*, contrasting ontological and epistemological assumptions can be combined in ways that constitute positivist or interpretivist philosophies. *Methods* can be divided, at least conceptually, into stages of *data generation* and *data analysis*, although sometimes they are combined as in the iterative approach used in grounded theory. *Methodology* concerns whether the methods used *enact* the philosophical underpinnings, implicit or explicit, of the researcher (i.e., applied philosophy). Placing methodology between philosophy and methods emphasizes that it is the "connective tissue" between self-conscious philosophical conceptions and pragmatic decisions made before research begins (design), during the conduct of research, and in the write-up.

Positivism and interpretivism make distinctive combinations of philosophical assumptions. Regarding epistemology, the objectivist assumption of positivism presumes that objectivity of the scientist is possible and desirable, and that scientists can and should set aside their personal values and identities in the conduct of research. The key concern is "bias," and particular research practices are meant to guard against it. In contrast, an interpretivist philosophical position posits that scientists are inevitably situated in societal structures—thereby affecting the questions asked and how the research is conducted with possible effects on conclusions drawn. Instead of procedures to guard against bias, the relevant practice is reflexivity: active reflection, during the research and research write-up phases, on how identity affects the study. As Power (2004) explains, revealing standpoints and critically examining them is a research community's responsibility; what Harding (1993) calls "strong objectivity" can be achieved at the level of the research community when researchers admit and theorize their identities rather than deny them.

Regarding ontology, positivists and interpretivists see language in contrasting ways. A realist ontology treats language as a labeling system for the world "out there." In Shakespearean terms, a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. As Berkovich (2018, 2069) expresses it, "the positivist viewpoint 'presupposes that there is some underlying, true, unequivocal reality'"—implying that language is a "doily" lying atop "reality." A constructivist ontology understands language as not only reflecting but actively constructing the social world, deeply intertwined with material practice such that language is not possible without practice and practice is not possible without language. And differences in meaning are consequential: whether the estate tax is understood as an "inheritance tax" or a "death tax" affects its political legitimacy; conceiving of immigrants as "illegal" or "undocumented" shapes their treatment; and depicting the public as "citizens" or "consumers" motivates the design and delivery of public services.

Conceptualizing methodology as applied philosophy clarifies that a method of data generation can be used in different ways with consequential effects for the evidence so produced. An

Table 14.1 Philosophy, methodology, method: Revealing the options on the qualitative side of the binary

Philosophy of Science	*Positivism*	*Interpretivism*
Epistemology	Objectivist • Identity as a contaminant	Interpretivist • Identity as a resource
Ontology	Realist • Language a mirror	Constructivist • Language constructs
Methodology as applied philosophy	Interview: Reduce bias of researcher identity (objectivity) Observation: isolate variables and reassemble as model(s) Existing text: Transform into numerical evidence *if* possible	Interview: Theorize researcher identity (reflexivity) Observation: In situ to preserve meaning-in-context; holism Existing text: Preserve the genre of the evidence
Methods		
Data generation	Similar to interpretivist but enacted in different ways Self-report data: Surveys (open-ended and close-ended for quantitative evidence), interviews, focus groups, life histories, etc. Observation of conduct in field notes, without reflexivity; guided by a priori variables thinking Existing text/records: Documents, pamphlets, legislation, etc.	Similar to positivist but enacted in different ways Self-report data: Interviews, group interviews, life histories, etc.; surveys not used because they strip away context; focus groups eschewed as not in situ Observation of conduct in situ, with degrees of participation; recorded in field notes, with reflexivity and thick description of context for holistic account Existing text/records: Documents, pamphlets, legislation, etc.
Data analysis		
• Numerical	Counts, percentages Statistical when possible, whether frequentist or Bayesian	Counts, percentages
• Word	Case analysis, Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), process tracing	Many techniques, e.g., metaphor analysis, deconstruction; case study Fit to genre of textual data

interview-based project conducted from a positivist position seeks to neutralize the researcher's identity because in that approach it is deemed a contaminant that biases research, moving it away from the ideal of *objectivity*. In contrast, an interview-based project conducted from an interpretive stance uses *reflexivity* to analyze how researcher identity interacts with interviewee identity, understanding interview evidence as co-generated by both parties (Fujii 2018). Similarly, contrasting methodological enactments can be spelled out for observation and for treatment of existing text as shown in Table 14.1. The case study method, too, can be applied in positivist ways, as implied by the research question comparing two Indian states' different rates of intimate partner

violence. Interpretivists who use the case study method seek a holistic sense of why actors conduct themselves in varying ways in relation to the different case contexts (Schaffer 2018).

Recognizing these distinctive orientations matters given the enthusiasm for "mixed methods" research. If methods are mixed *within* either a positivist or an interpretivist philosophy, then coherence is not a problem. Interpretivist-qualitative ethnographers have long drawn on a mix of interviews, observation, and documents (Pachirat 2018). Similarly, positivist-qualitative case study researchers draw on a multitude of sources, from not only numerical evidence where available but also interviews and documents (Mahoney and Goertz 2006). However, the coherence of a mixed-methodologies (i.e., applied philosophies) study can be challenged. How, or why, would a researcher simultaneously endorse a realist and a constructivist ontology of language? How, or why, would one simultaneously claim that researcher identity is irrelevant (applying a plethora of methods to avoid bias) *and* that it is inevitable (therefore actively reflecting on how identity affects the research)? Most importantly, the choice of philosophy matters because, as Table 14.1 emphasizes, methodology as applied philosophy means conducting research in distinctive ways. These are the sorts of difficulties that the continued use of qualitative-quantitative binary creates.

Choosing a tradition

Feminists using either a positivist-qualitative or an interpretivist-qualitative approach will, likely, still share goals, particularly the desire to get closer to phenomena than economists who use quantitative data sets. It is getting close—to bodies, practices and processes, emotions, and world views—that forces a reckoning with the sort of abstract theory and associated statistical methods that disappear human beings from social science. But which tradition should they choose?

The positivist-qualitative option

Given their disciplinary training, feminist economists will find much in this approach that will feel familiar. Consider Brady and Collier's (2010) volume—*Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*—in which they assume a shared philosophical position with quantitative researchers, which allows them to treat methods as simply "tools," that is, different only because the evidence is qualitative instead of quantitative. As they state (2010, 315), "case-oriented researchers certainly think in terms of variables, but their attention is strongly focused on detailed contextual knowledge of specific cases and on how variables interact with the context of these cases." Thinking in terms of variables is a good practical indicator of a positivist stance. (Interpretivists do not think in terms of variables but in terms of the experiences of those studied.) As their title attests, as positivist-qualitative researchers they share standards with positivist-quantitative researchers—concerns such as adequate operationalization (i.e., validity and reliability), causal inference, and specification of the intended scope of theory.

Brady and Collier's volume is an exemplar showcasing that positivist-qualitative methodologists have invented ways to (a) discipline their "messy evidence" (i.e., not sharing units of analysis) and (b) reimagine statistical ideas to apply to such evidence—for example, controlled comparison, which includes a "matching of cases on selected variables" (2010, 322). This methodological literature has developed a rich set of methods for researchers who cannot quantify their evidence sufficiently to apply statistics. They argue for the superiority of their approach for certain purposes such as the identification of causal mechanisms, demonstrating that quantitative approaches cannot unpack the substance of what happens between the independent and dependent variables in satisfactory ways.

For feminist researchers trained as economists, the advantages of this tradition include a less steep learning curve and the opportunity to do coherent mixed-methods research. Key methods to complement econometric analysis include case studies (involving archival sources, interviewing, documents, observational field research), with case selection methods literature for design and, for analysis, qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) pioneered by Ragin (1987) and process tracing. Process tracing involves a set of decision-making criteria for deciding the strength of particular pieces of evidence in a causal chain (Beach 2017). Because of shared philosophical background and standards for assessing research, as well as the emphasis on understanding causal mechanisms in ways not possible with quantitative methods, these positivist-qualitative methods may be especially appealing ways of impacting mainstream economic knowledge, if so desired.

The interpretivist-qualitative option

For scholars of feminist economics, this approach enables understanding of meaning-in-context. Pujol (1997, 119) used ethnographic methods to address her research question, "How did the agents of implementation [e.g., managers] understand the concepts of pay equity and of the gendered wage gap?" Such understanding can be ascertained via interview methods (Fujii 2018), but it is interpretive ethnographic observation that enables the contrast between espoused and enacted values. In a methodological piece advocating for "relations" as a key unit of analysis for economics, Zelizer recommends ethnographic methods to get at "participants' variable understandings of the process" (2012, 165) of economic exchange and the "construction of meaning and the organization of categories" essential to understanding "all forms of economic activity" (2012, 149).

Interpretivists enact what they understand as the superiority of their methods, with meanings-connected-to-context as essential to *all* research projects. Advantages include surfacing local knowledge, ways of reading silences in evidence, and identification of tacit assumptions that underpin cooperation or conflict. Methodological innovations include new conceptualizations of both causation and generalizability and development of standards of evaluation appropriate to interpretive purposes (for an overview, see Schwartz-Shea 2014). As one example, the meaning and practice of "generalizable findings" can be flipped. Providing thick description of a study context makes it possible for potential users to compare that context to their own, thereby enabling users to assess whether research results will actually work for them.

A final advantage is interpretivism's philosophical consistency with the five tenets of SPA, as outlined by Power (2004). First, SPA rejects an essentialist understanding of *gender*, endorsing a view of language not as a neutral labeling system but as an "active forc[e] shaping" society (Power 2004, 6, citing Gordon and Fraser 1994), a stance consistent with the constructivist ontology of interpretivism. This stance encompasses the feminist concept of intersectionality, that gender is constructed and experienced via class, race, and other major social identities. Second, the SPA view of *human society* as "interdependent and interconnected human actors . . . rather than the [the sum of] isolated individual[s]" (Power 2004, 4) fits well with the interpretivist understanding of societal systems as intersubjectively constructed through language and practice. Third, SPA sees *ethical judgments* as integral to economic analysis because theory cannot be neatly divided into positive and normative analyses (Benería, Berik, and Floro 2016, 65). Interpretivists too reject the positivist fact/value dichotomy (the possibility of an ethics-free, value-free "neutral" theory) because they recognize the constructivist nature of scientific language and emphasize reflexivity, a research practice that accords with Harding's (1993) epistemological conception of "strong objectivity." Fourth, the SPA criterion of *well-being* as a key indicator of economic success connects to lived experience—a concept which comes from the

phenomenological tradition that is a primary source of interpretive methodology. Fifth, SPA attends to *power*, including the *agency* of actors. It is the case that interpretive methodology has been criticized as insensitive to power, but Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012, 43) argue that application of interpretive methods "perforce engages power dynamics" because it attends to the immediate context faced by social actors. And while not all interpretive scholars center actor agency in their work (e.g., some Foucauldians), most take it as an integral part of a constructivist ontology in that individuals "make" reality on a daily basis through their language and activities. In sum, SPA aligns with an interpretivist philosophy and its associated interpretive methods.

The gestalt switch required by interpretivism may require a steep learning curve, but the charge to understand women's lived experience and the importance of observation-in-context to many areas of economics can motivate the investment. The incredible range of available analytic techniques—from discourse analysis to semiotics—may stimulate creativity in topic areas that have only been approached and analyzed in ways consistent with positivist assumptions. Methods citations for such techniques are too numerous to list, but for those beginning a study Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) give methodological advice for designing an interpretive project.

Conclusion

Feminist researchers using qualitative evidence have made important contributions to economics. By rejecting the quantitative-qualitative binary and recognizing both positivist-qualitative and interpretivist-qualitative possibilities, scholars of feminist economics are poised to develop their own methodological traditions. One potential area of shared interest is in research that studies the construction of indicators used to track social problems—for example, sex trafficking and migration. Interpretive researchers study such measures to ask which aspects of the phenomenon get emphasized, which ignored, and who decides (e.g., Merry 2016). This shared interest in indicators could be an area for building conversations among scholars of feminist economics about how to develop community support for both positivist-qualitative and interpretive methods, so that researchers need no longer go it alone as Piore (2006) found necessary. Building such community might be part of reclaiming the radical edge that Tejani worries has been blunted. Although nurturing an interpretive community would be challenging, Barker (2003, 104, original emphasis) articulates an understanding of economics that emphasizes why interpretivist approaches, although still rare, hold considerable promise: "economics is best understood as a *discourse* . . . economics is a system of meanings, categories, and beliefs, articulated and supported by various practices and institutions." An emphasis on meaning-making actors is precisely what interpretive methodologies and methods provide.

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