Introduction

“The article has an interesting theme...Unfortunately; the article suffers from a number of flaws which are not easily remedied.”

This was the judgment articulated in one of the three referee comments on an article which I and my co-writer tried to get published in the late 2000s. “Referee Traditionalist” continued his/her critics by stating that

“The authors speak of an empirical study. The article does not contain a systematic study of (actor)s or a large number of facts on which generalized statements could be based. On the contrary, it is an observational study that generates an interpretation rather than a measurement of the activities of the two (actor)s…”

“Referee Curious”, being more positive to our subject, complained, however, that our use of postmodern concepts is mystifying for an average reader. S/he wanted more explanation of the concepts.

The journal is quite a new, international publication, with interests in arts, aesthetics and cultural matters. In this field there have been a lot of creative discussions going on concerning the research methodology. When we authors previously were working with the structure of the article, our belief, at the end of the 2000’s, was that the scientific status of qualitative research is widely accepted? That the basic arguments concerning the credibility of research would not be required in a specific article in journals which are familiar with qualitative research, and have published research reports where the studies have been conducted by
qualitative methods. We thought it could be sufficient with a short reference to methodology in order to confirm our acquaintance with the subject. Thereby the limited space in an article could be used to discuss the aspects with relevance to the substance. Surely, the Referee Traditionalist was positive to the theme in our article, but had not much to say about the subject. Fortunately, the third referee, “Referee Alert” was versed in the field and could give feedback which helped us to find interesting and new literature about the subject.

Our reflection on the referee comments was that especially Referee Traditionalist followed the conventional criteria of positivist research concerning the topics of validity, reliability and generalizations. S/he questioned, for instance, the reliability of our research because of a minor research population. Although it is not at all surprising to be reviewed by persons with differing ontological and epistemological perspectives, I must admit that we authors were a bit frustrated when getting this kind of feedback. Consequently, inspired by the referee comments the aim of this text is, once again, to argue for the credibility of research conducted by qualitative methodology? – In order to create relevant and high quality qualitative research I see a point in continuing this discussion in a context where the qualitative research is valued on its own premises.

**Methods for the study of this article**

Besides our original draft to the journal and the final published article, the empirical materials for this story are the written documents of the three referees, contrasted by the arguments by us, the authors, to respond them. My approach has also got inspiration from a method named introspection (Brown, 1998; Frostling-Henningsson, 2004) which is commonly used in psychology, but also in several other disciplines like anthropology and sociology. In business administration the method exists in marketing and consumer behaviour studies and can be considered as the ultimate form of participant observation. Because introspection focuses on the voice of the researcher Brown (1998) argues for the benefits of using it when a researcher has a specific interest in the phenomenon studied, and is even passionately involved in it. In this text I’ll refer to our experiences and interpretations during the review process, although my aim is not to get involved in some deeper descriptions or analysis about our emotional reactions.
I’m also influenced by Alvesson & Sköldbergs (2000) arguments for reflexive methodology, based on hermeneutic and critical perspectives. They talk about “the interpretation of interpretation” (p. 6) and observe that all empirical data is always interpreted which focuses both on the theoretical assumptions underlining the study and the pre-understanding of the researcher. The authors write about the importance of self-reflexion of the researcher, aiming at critical self-exploration of one’s own interpretations and constructions. They also stress taking into consideration “the perceptual, cognitive, theoretical, linguistic, (inter)textual, political and cultural circumstances that form the backdrop to – as well as impregnate – the interpretations” (ibid.). We don’t do research on social world in a vacuum, in “an objective reality”.

**Review of the critical referee comments and our responses to them**

Our interpretation about the quoted comments in the introduction part was that credibility of our research was questioned. We think that the referee statements tell about conventional positivist assumptions about the nature of social reality and knowledge creation according to which reality is viewed as concrete, separate from the researcher and best understood by using rigorous research methods for data collection (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000).

Referee Traditionalist didn’t literally demand that we should have used quantitative methods instead of qualitative ones, although speaking about measurements. The perspective s/he applies could probably be named as qualitative positivism (Prasad, 2005). I would say, following Prasad, that Referee Traditionalists opinions “suffer … from positivist anxiety that is manifested in an eagerness to measure up to conventional positivist standards” (Prasad, 2005, p.4).

**Framework? – social constructionism, relational perspective, aesthetics**

“*The article lacks a methodological set-up for observational study. What frame-work did the researchers use?*” *What particular questions did they want to answer and what part of the organizational aspects did they want to observe?*
Our interpretation: the research is not valid according to scientific criteria. The authors don’t tell what questions they want to ask, and how do they connect their methodology to the subject, whatever it is. The research results are not reliable because of lack of the methodological set up.

Our comment: Concerning the question about framework, we didn’t understand that it wouldn’t have been there in the Draft. In the Draft we write that our studies were based on social constructionist tradition (Berger and Luckman, 1967) and especially point out a view called relational constructionism (Gergen, 1994; Hosking and Mc Namee, 2006). - In the revised version, we sharpened our statements about ontological and epistemological assumptions and emphasized once again that our studies and text were based on social constructionist tradition.

In the Draft we also mention our inspiration from the discussion around modernism, postmodernism and “after” (Calàs & Smircich, 1999). The discussion has vividly been going on in different arenas in social sciences and humanities during the last decades and thereby is the intellectual context for us authors. Referee Curious wanted more explanations about the concepts of post modern thinking, which s/he thought were mystifying for an average reader. – In our comments to Referee Curious, as well as in the Revised version we argue that the aim of our article is not an introduction, or an advertisement, to postmodernism. However, we want to emphasize that we agree with Johansson and Miegel (1996) in their statements that although many people are skeptical about the most extreme theorizing in the postmodernist tradition, several ideas have become intellectual fixtures in the humanities and social sciences. Examples include the criticism of universalism, the theorizing around the decentred subject, the blurring of the line between popular and fine art, and changes in our understanding of time and space.

We also draw attention to aesthetics in organizations as an important part in our frame (Gagliardi, 1996; Strati, 1999; Lindstead & Höpfl, 2000). Aesthetics as a perspective in organizational knowledge creation concerns knowledge acquired through our senses (hearing, sight, touch, smell and taste) and our ability to judge whether something is pleasurable or repugnant – that is whether it is to our liking or not.
Questions to ask? The subject of our studies was leadership in a specific organizational field, but in different kind of organizations and with differing activities in these organizations, too. Consistent with the social constructionist tradition we view leadership and organizing practices as intimately connected (Gergen, 1994; Dachler & Hosking, 2005; Hosking & McMahon, 2006). That is why we found it necessary in our Draft to explain how we connect the question of leadership to our ontological and epistemological position. Consequently, our view on human beings is that we view the individual and society as processes of relations which means that individuals and groups are not autonomous, fixed entities. The construction of the self is constantly coming into being; we are constantly interacting in relation to others in processes in which our subjectivities are created.

Based on our empirical studies we propose in our Draft that the perspective in which a leader is viewed as a lone hero should be replaced by the relational one. In the relational perspective the every day work processes and practices in an organization are in focus, and leadership is constructed continuously in these processes. The leadership cannot be defined by arguments how successful a leaders is, or what special qualities s/he possesses. Instead, the leader shares with others the responsibility for the construction and execution of leadership in his/her organization. Leadership can be characterized as dispersed in an organization (Dachler & Hosking, 2005; Koivunen, 2003, 2006; Köping, 2003; Soila-Wadman, 2003; Soila-Wadman & Köping, 2009; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

A methodological set-up for observational study? - Ethnography, interviews, documents

In the Draft we tell that our research approach has been qualitative, based on ethnography and interviews where the interpretations of the researcher are an obvious part of the research process. However, we were accused by Referee Traditionalist that our empirical material from the field was only “a few words … stated as a fact” by which we tried to generalize our findings. - In our comments we emphasize that our studies indeed were carried out using qualitative methods, mainly ethnography and interviewing (Czarniawska, 1998; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1973; Kvale, 1996; van Maanen, 1988; Silverman, 2004). Surely, the studies concerning direct observations were done in only two organizations. But to complement these observations and to gain as comprehensive a view as possible, we both researchers interviewed several members in many other projects and in various professional
and occupational roles relevant to the studied field, not only people in leader positions. Additionally, in order to increase credibility in our research we studied different kinds of sources besides the theoretical literature; memories, novels, newspapers, films, magazines, articles, journals, films, literature, etc. We also participated in several academic workshops and conferences and joined in different kinds of conversations and debates. We would say that we spent several years immersed in the studied field which in our meaning increased the credibility of our research.

**Theoretical frame**

“Certain details are mentioned because it strikes the observer but this appears personal and not based on the expectations that could have been formulated based on the existing literature.”

What concerns the question of having a theoretical frame and having prepared questions when starting a research, we pointed out that our research strategy has been *abductive*, oscillating between the empirical and theoretical fields in an ongoing research process (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). The important idea in the beginning of the studies, according to the tradition in ethnography, was to go to the empirical field with the aim to get rich material to “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973). That means seeing and experiencing what is happening in the field and being open to the questions that emerge successively during the study (Alvesson & Köping, 1994; van Maanen, 1988). However, a researcher/research is always influenced by theories and theorizing in the research field, which became more and more into focus during the writing process. – We are not arguing that there is something like raw empirical facts. We totally agree with Alvesson & Sköldberg (ibid.) that data is more and less implicitly theory-impregnated and always interpreted, but can be viewed through different lenses. – In our Revised text we added a separate note concerning the details how we had gained and constructed our empirical material as well as a note about some texts where the canonical leadership literature is reviewed. However, we emphasized in our comments that our aim was not to present a history of (mainstream) leadership literature. (But we were grateful for the comments from Referee Alert for the new literature concerning shared and dispersed leadership which we added in the article.)
The observations have no generalized value without a systematic study…

We were also accused of making universalizing generalizations based on too few cases, which we didn’t claim to do. We talk about highlighting important aspects in organizational practices and emphasize that our purpose is not to generalise in the meaning of drawing conclusions about our studies in order to be the truth in all kinds of organizations. Consistent with the notion of “strategic choice” (Bryman, 2001; Eneroth, 2003) our selection of the interviewees was not based on random samples in big populations; instead our aim was obtaining as much rich and interesting data as possible. The studies were conducted over a period of two to three years and some of the informants were interviewed on numerous occasions. In contrast to the research tradition of “collecting facts as mushrooms” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, heard in several conversations with the authors) with the ultimate goal of generalization in large populations, our aim was to highlight and examine important aspects of organizational and leadership practices in the studied organizations. - However, because these examples tell about human activity which gets shape and form in every day practices we would talk about “analytical generalizations” in line with Kvale (1996). We mean that readers probably will find something familiar in our stories. Maybe they will recognize their own work situation in the accounts, finding some inspiration in them for their own life (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000; Baszanger and Dodier, 2004; Czarniawska, 1998; Kvale, 1996).

Discussion

My question in the beginning of this text is how to argue for the value and credibility of qualitative research. However, while I have been analyzing the referee comments for this text I have become more and more frustrated on the presented situation. I ask if I, as a qualitative researcher in a post positivist tradition, am expected to argue for the credibility of my research with concepts and consents which emanate from an ontological and epistemological position I do not share.

Getting the career circumstances we have in the academic world to get our texts published, the power question cannot be neglected, either. Who has the power to define what can be said, and how? How to argue when the referee on the one hand, doesn’t want to accept another
view on science? On the other hand, sometimes it is possible to make interpretations on referee comments that the person doesn’t agree with the opinions presented in the text, and attacks the contents by talking about methodological shortcomings. - Our interpretation was that because Referee Traditionalist didn’t give an impression of understanding our ontological and epistemological thinking s/he couldn’t follow our reasoning concerning the leadership in a relational perspective, either. Instead, we were accused for lacking the methodological and theoretical focus. - However, I try to accept that it is not suitable (possible?) for me, either, to force my ontological and epistemological values on another person who doesn’t share my values.

Consequently, there has been a shift in the aim of this text to asking how we do create relevant and high quality qualitative research\(^1\), not in the controversy to quantitative or positivist research but based on its own premises. According to Kvale (1996) some qualitative researchers want to ignore “the holy trinity” of validity, reliability and generalizations as being obstacles and barriers for creative qualitative research. Others, instead of the concept reliability will use concepts as credibility, and discuss the truth value of one’s results. Then the question of validity can be viewed as a social construction of the contents of the research results and the reasonalibility of these results. A third line of arguments is to see the validity question as an opportunity for quality control which should be applied to the whole research process. Prasad (2005: 284), too, talks about the need of paying attention to the whole chain in doing research if we have the aim of crafting qualitative research; that is “the formulation of the research problem, its connection to the existing literature, the choice of a theoretical framework, an awareness of underlying assumptions, the selection of suitable site or set of subjects, the collection and analysis of data, and the final the presentation of the findings.” To get good qualitative research is depending on the skill of the researchers. Prasad continues talking about qualitative research as artisanship and craftwork. As an activity it is concrete, variable and context dependent. Knowledge of methods as an appropriate use of techniques for data collection and analysis is not enough, not either are the theoretical paradigms are sufficient for engaging in the craft of research. She pleads for being conscious of the intellectual tradition one is engaged in and finding the pleasure in ones efforts.

\(^1\) This text doesn’t argue against quantitative research. What approach and methods a researcher chooses must depend on the research question.
Final words – lessons learned

There is the political aspect to remember in all research, and the question still exists; whether it is meaningful to try to get published in journals with little knowledge about qualitative research traditions. However, a note about introspection; Brown (1998) warns for not falling in self-pity. There will Alvesson & Sköldbergs (2000) thoughts about self-reflexion come in use. I don’t mean that our text shouldn’t have needed remediation and further processing. We did it, and eventually, got the article published. We became more conscious about the importance of the rhetorical process, too; how to present both the frame of our research and the insights of our studies. Consequently, we wrote a better text with help of the referee comments, either we agreed with them, or argued against. In the process of shaping our arguments we developed our artisanship and craft.

References:


