DRAWING NEW ROUTES: WHY A QUALITATIVE STANCE IN WORK AND ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY'S RESEARCH

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The paper addresses the debate about the relevance of qualitative inquiry for research within Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP), claiming for the assumption of a methodological pluralism to inspire new research for the production of critical and relevant knowledge. In the first part the authors depict the progressive emersion of qualitative approach in WOP as applied science, pointing out some epistemological, gnoseological, and methodological implications. In the second part, the most distinctive features of the qualitative approach are underlined, dealing with the social and material dimensions that contribute to the production of the required knowledge. Four distinctive dimensions are outlined: the social configuration of the objects of inquiry; the logic of knowing from within; research questions stemming from the field; the transformative stance of the generated knowledge. The final considerations advocate for the enhancement of plural and legitimated ways of conceiving the production of knowledge, its recognition, and its dissemination.

Keywords: Qualitative research; Social objects; Situativity; Practice knowledge; Intrinsic relevance.

The current epistemological and methodological debate in Psychology valorises and points out qualitative methods as a proper approach for producing knowledge and doing good research work. This is witnessed for example in: the publication of handbooks and books (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Stainton-Rogers & Willig, 2008); the foundation in 2004 of the *Qualitative Research in Psychology* journal and in 2013 of *Qualitative Psychology*, an official APA journal; the establishment of the qualitative methodology section in Division 5 of the APA; the realization from 2012 of the Society for Qualitative Inquiry Psychology congress; the collective mobilisation on Twitter (hashtag #BMJnoQual; Bekker, 2015; Clark & Thompson, 2016) in defence of a researcher whose paper, submitted to the British Medical Journal (BMJ), was rejected because it was based on qualitative research (Greenhalgh et al., 2016); the emerging congresses and communities like Qualitative Research in Management and Organizations Conference. The debate, along with these events, have influenced also the field of Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP) at an international level and in Italy (Montali et al., 2019).

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Seeking to enrich the debate, we aim to offer a reflection on the relevance of qualitative inquiry for research within WOP, highlighting how the variety of empirical material, methods for analysing data as well as ways of presenting the results of qualitative research allow both a deep understanding of the phenomena under study and the acknowledgement of possible ways to intervene in, change, and transform them.

At a wider level, we share the assumption of a methodological pluralism that characterises qualitative research in WOP today, and the possibility that this approach may inspire new research for the production of critical and relevant knowledge, as well as of significant impact also in WOP. The paper is divided in two parts. In the first section, we depict the progressive emersion (but also emergency, need, urgency) of qualitative approach in WOP as applied science, with some epistemological, gnoseological, and methodological implications. In the second section, we underline the distinctive features at stake in the qualitative approach: encountering living, dynamic, social, and material objects (Garfinkel, 1967); "seeing" them from within (Shotter, 2010); starting from research questions emerging from organizational contexts and subjects' work experiences; the need to spend our energies in order to produce qualitative results which will be significant, pertinent, and in dialogue with theories.

WOP AS APPLIED SCIENCE: CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

The emergence of increasing interest for qualitative approaches refers to the need of reinterpreting the disciplinary context of WOP as an applied social science, oriented to the study and analysis of phenomena and themes inherent to the organizational and working world in their various articulations and phenomenologies. The existing mainstream conveys an erroneous attribution of superiority to particular methods and research results, attributable to randomised controlled studies — or equivalent ones — and to the expectation of linear transposition from the acquired research knowledge to practice.

A key issue relies on the meaning of *applying* in relation to the representation of professional practice, called upon to use the best available "evidence" to formulate judgements and decisions in one's field of action. Barends et al. (2014) argue that the exercise of a reasoned, explicit, and judicious decision-making process should involve explicit reference to four forms of "evidence": research results; data, events, and factual elements collected by organizations; the professional experience and judgement of practitioners; the values and interests of stakeholders. In recurring situations where specific search results are not available (or the accessible ones are unsatisfactory), the use of experiential knowledge capable of reflection and critical thinking, discernment, and expert judgement, becomes crucial. Such judgement must make use of the different sources of "evidence" available, avoiding assigning rankings of greater/lesser validity to one or the other, modulating them with reference to local needs to be discerned and evaluated. The emphasis is on the enhancement of tacit judgements, of local knowledge, of contextual competencies that can generate situated interpretations.

These themes resonate and relaunch the way to conceive production and generation of knowledge in the context of the disciplines that deal with organization and related processes. One could, in fact, ask why epistemic value should be assigned to action, thus confusing it with theory. Other questions raise this possible doubt: why should we value the knowledge of the various actors on the ground? Why should relations be maintained with communities of operators who experience the phenomena we are studying on a daily basis in different organizational areas?

The answer is that this kind of knowledge is structurally connected to situativity (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Scaratti, 2012) as subjects assign symbolic value to organizational and working life by partici-

pating in practices and becoming competent actors through progressive learning of ordinary relationships, which allow them to recognise situations, to use rules and conventions, to be part of the concrete processes of knowing, learning and organizing that characterise the system of activities daily and socially produced/ reproduced in different situations. Hence, it is needed to consider the social and material dimensions that contribute to the production of the required knowledge. This implies the need to enter into a relationship with the flow of work experience of the subjects and with the constant processes of interpretation in action, referring to situated, circulating, socially guarded, and widespread structures of meaning.

This constitutes a challenging and crucial key point for the emergency and need for qualitative approach in researching managerial, organizational, and workplace processes.

As an implication of this perspective, at stake is a conception inherent in the dialogue between theory and practice that finds an emblematic anchor in the same formulation of Kurt Lewin, with reference to two of his famous statements. The well-known statement that "there is nothing more practical than a good theory" can be used to attest to the primacy of scientific-academic knowledge in order to guide, predict, and control performance and organizations. On the other hand, another famous Lewinian sentence proclaims that "to know a thing one must try to change it," highlighting the necessity to consider the use of knowledge made by subjects, identifying the contexts of action as a primary source from which human beings draw their meanings and the criteria with which they act, in order to study the ways in which they relate to events and situations.

This echoes an overcoming of the modernist vision of rationality as a unitary and privileged system of knowledge (Shani et al. 2013; Toulmin, 1990), attributable to the model of the natural sciences: in this vision, every other form of knowledge, in particular practical knowledge, is weakened and reduced to an accessory and unreliable mode of knowledge.

Following this trajectory, we are looking forward to the change toward a non-positivist position of rigour that accommodates complexity, attention to micro and meso levels, interwoven with social relations and processes. Furthermore, this approach can support an understanding of the processes of subjective meaning attribution of events in different situations and clarify the validation criteria adopted according to the epistemological and methodological positions taken. This refers to the contribution of Dario Romano (2006; 2010) and his invitation to question a unitary vision of science and modern knowledge, to assume an epistemic awareness of a science that is immersed in the world. Under this definition, when oriented to the study of human action in its various individual and collective manifestations science cannot evade the theme of responsibility of its use, putting truth and values, epistemic and ethical demands into dialogue. It is an idea of science where knowledge is co-produced since by studying organizational processes one crosses the field of interpretation, connected to the different meanings attributed by subjects to their experience and to the knowledge incorporated in situations.

Another contribution from the WOP field by Ivar Oddone (as cited in Scaratti, 2014b) has introduced the principle of consensual validation on specific issues, objects, and themes (such as those related to the health and well-being of workers): the participation of figures with consolidated expertise and knowledge from experience generates, under certain conditions, the production of knowledge endowed with transferability, scientific relevance, and applicability in different contexts. Knowledge becomes relevant as it is attributed with meaning and value by the various interlocutors involved, who recognise the results generated with respect to the problems they have to face. The possibility of a connection between research and action implies a constant regulation between reflective distance and immersion in contexts, overcoming an idea of rigour solely attributable to criteria of linear causality, rules of correlation, and forecasting control (difficult to practice if applied to the study of organizations and human systems). This ap-

proach better fits the need to achieve more awareness and congruence of interpretations for a consensually validated understanding, achieving generalisation not in terms of mechanical repetition, but as a re-proposition in other contexts of the repertoires acquired and consolidated by a critical reflection.

A further concrete implication of this vision concerns the need for an articulated and relevant understanding of the organizational phenomenon, required by its configuration as an artefact and social process, as a "human world" inseparable from the meanings and knowledge incorporated by the situations. This calls for a rereading of the usual concepts of organization and its functioning, as well as of the methods deemed adequate for studying and understanding its complex and articulated processes.

From a methodological point of view, the idea of an organization (Czarniawska, 2008) constantly built by the actions and interpretations of the people who live there and who, therefore, have an internal knowledge of it (certainly peculiar and essential, even if not exclusive), argues in favour of more descriptions/interpretations/understandings of the same organisation and their possible comparison according to different criteria (pragmatic, aesthetic, explanatory). Consequently, the purpose of organizational research can be both to intercept and describe recurring and in-use practices, to understand general operating principles, and to put the two dimensions in dialogue. Hence, there is a possibility to consider not only traditional ways of producing knowledge, according to theoretical-disciplinary logics for the identification of research problems and marking linear sequences of hypothesis application and verification of results, but also processes of social production of knowledge. In this scenario, problems are generated within contexts, through explicit and implicit forms of negotiation and social constructions that involve several actors, different disciplinary knowledge, and material and immaterial dimensions (Scaratti, 2014a).

Another implication regards the gnoseological perspective since qualitative research implies the use of what Polanyi (1962) called "tacit and personal knowledge," referring to the theme of *phronesis* as distinct from the *episteme* and bearer of practical knowledge (or wisdom, judgement) capable of orienting and informing the actions of subjects on the basis of resolutions recognised as valid and relevant. The possibility that practitioners use evidence to produce informed judgements (assumed at the basis of the evidence approach) also depends on phronesis, which joins the episteme as a legitimate and relevant form of knowledge, capable of orienting practical actions within the multiple human contexts in which the subjects are involved. At stake are two modes and expressions of knowledge that can and should be recognised and legitimised in a logic of authentic orientation toward decision-making informed by reasonableness and sustainability. The episteme expresses and offers knowledge that bears analytical rationality, capable of generating universal principles. Phronesis manifests and conveys orientations and references coordinates to move in a flexible and adaptive way in situations characterised by many levels of complexity: surprise, exposure to uncertainty and the unexpected, mutability of contexts, based on experience and professional judgement / wisdom that settles in practical knowledge, functional to face the challenges related to the particularity and contingency of contexts. This line of reasoning leads to phronesis as bearing a legitimacy and dignity as a valid source of knowledge, not as an alternative or in opposition to others, but with its own plausibility and autonomous relevance and usability.

The qualitative approach makes it possible to interpret the applicative dimension of research in terms of detecting practical knowledge and its use in contexts, subjecting it to a reflective examination in which different types of knowledge and available evidence (theoretical, practical, connected to the influence of stakeholders, and the concrete organizational realities) are actually employed.

Moreover, the reference to phronesis opens up the possibility of configuring scientific problems that are typical of an area such as that of applied social research, in which the knowledge questions are of-

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ten defined starting from a dialogue with interlocutors and contexts, also according to evidence available (or to be researched) regarding the values, interests, and concerns of the various stakeholders involved.

This process follows a conception of research and its phases as a social practice, which involves negotiations and situated, socially defined and acquired knowledge. Here we find perhaps the most important antidote to the risk of homologation and standardisation of traditional mainstream research's procedures conceived as taken for granted and only oriented to a one best way to utilize the available methods. Research as social process seeks for a good enough choise of approaches laboriously and constantly promoted by an authentic tension toward truth and the reduction of errors.

As a consequence of the proposed considerations, it should be asked whether the inspiration for a model of scientific practitioner, with its implicit presupposition of primacy and consequent linear and temporal sequentiality from scientific discoveries to practice, should not be deeply reconsidered and reconfigured, at least in reference to certain areas and cognitive problems, in particular those relating to the psychology of work and organizations.

THE DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF QUALITATIVE APPROACH IN WOP

A preliminary point to consider the contribution that the qualitative approach can offer to WOP research as a whole is the decisive overcoming of the objection (Kieser & Leiner, 2009) which sees the collaboration between researchers and practitioners as negative, by virtue of a claimed irreconcilability between objectives related to scientific knowledge and those related to the solution of organizational problems, as if the creation of knowledge were only the prerogative of researchers. In reality, both accessing and producing organizational knowledge require the activation of processes of joint construction, gaining proximity to contexts to grasp how the various actors involved interpret and translate their symbolic references (theories, values, cultures, ...). Recognising the plurality of voices at stake and the need to listen to them also means distancing oneself from stereotypes which see, on the one hand, the adherence to false beliefs, connected to managerial identification with widespread trends and precisely for this reason conceived as transferable; on the other hand, the assumption of technical rigidity mistaken for rigour, in the name of a homologation of the organizational world to a variable that can be investigated according to criteria used in the physical or chemical sciences.

As qualitative work and organizational psychologists we share an appreciation for complexity, not for the sake of simply liking it but because we recognise that knowledge and constructions of human work experiences are uniquely situated, multifaceted, and seldom (if ever) understandable only through many theoretical frameworks of interpretation that operate across different fields. We think that in the field of WOP there is the need to develop a form of knowledge that avoid simple reductions and that celebrate the complexities of organizational life; this is a sensibility that feminist researchers have taught to qualitative researchers and that organizational psychologists need to learn. Qualitative research often results in nuanced and deep accounts of the complexity of organizational life and this requires the use of a wide range of research methods: not only interviews (or even no more interviews) but also discourse and conversational analysis, visual analysis, art-based research, ethnography, and many more. Following this line, we join the qualitative movement that started to interrogate the notion of "data" (Benozzo et al., 2013; Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2017). We are referring to scholars who have questioned the taken-for-granted-ness of standard and normative approaches to data and have started to problematise the fact that: data have been considered to possess a kind of authenticity, uncontaminated by the interventions and interest of human

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acts of selection and interpretation and analysis; data are not ethically neutral, but can function as support-ing dirty, powerful, and dangerous practices; data are recruited into neoliberal discourses as input for "evi-dence-based" policy and practice; and importantly, data have turned research into a legitimised business, a rigourous enterprise.

The qualitative approach promises compatibility between rigour and relevance starting from re-search questions generated by problems that managers, employees, and operators in the field experience every day, adopting an inquiry process that integrates scientific knowledge and practical knowledge related to ways of working. The approach values the actionable connotation attributed to the knowledge generated, in terms of tangibility and usability as further traits denoting a production of meaningful knowledge. This refers to figures of collaboration into play and the related implications of which various representations of the relationship between different worlds and stakeholders (academic, organizational, institutional) are grafted in terms of transposition, transfer, and translation of knowledge.

The qualitative approach to WOP research can be acknowledged as a carrier of four distinctive dimensions: the social configuration of the objects of inquiry; the logic of knowing from within; research questions stemming from the field; the transformative stance of the generated knowledge.

About the first dimension, Garfinkel (1947) argues that social objects (such as the concept of "red" to describe a political/identity belonging) provide specific features:

- they depend on the meanings of the historical-cultural and social contexts in which they are used (semantic property);

- they refer to a set of values, assumptions, rules, implicit elements that configure their use both operationally and symbolically — in terms of positive vs. negative expectations, adequacy vs. inadequacy, inclusion vs. exclusion (moral properties);

- they assign certain positions and functions to figures and actors, determining the widespread and circulating social expectations in a context (role ownership).

These objects are characterised by not being traceable back to specific referential symbols (SRS = specific referent symbols) providing a rigid and defined classification and determination of boundaries, as in the traditional way of conceiving science. They rather refer to expressive symbols (ES = expressional symbols), characterised by being elastic and indexical, that is, linked to their context of use as regards the meaning they assume.

The WOP themes and issues can reasonably be identified as social objects, according to the defini-tion just mentioned by Garfinkel, characterised by "unrepeatable uniqueness," precisely because they are strongly anchored to interests, expectations, values that are configured through exchanges and social inter-actions, contrasts and negotiations between different expectations and interpretations. The study of these objects requires a coherent approach capable of capturing references, representations, knowledge, typical readings of the experience of those who live in a context, as for example ethnography aims to do.

It is precisely the attention to local systems of activity and a strong context-driven orientation that establish a close connection between the qualitative research sphere and the organizational dimensions, both converging (albeit from different perspectives) on the need to approach/immerse oneself in specific situations to intercept and combine the established relationship between descriptions and interpretation of events and activities.

In relation to the second dimension, Shotter (2008, 2010) draws attention to the concept of know-ing from within, indicating with it the need to relate to others and what happens around them. Studying or-ganizational processes in this perspective means interacting with people, with their actions and understand-ings, according to a committed and responsive research approach, which intercepts the flow of processes

from within and engages with them. This means connecting with living organizational forms and developing a dialogically structured relationship with them. At stake is the possibility of accessing the concrete processes of understanding that characterise the system of activities in which people are involved, intercepting the forms of anticipation and attribution of meaning that allow people to move forward in their action. In this regard, Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013) propose a reading of the relationship between researcher and subjects involved according to a perspective defined within hyphen-space, in reference to the dash that unites and separates simultaneously (and symbolically) the interlocutors involved in research work on the field. It is a relationship that mutually influences the actors in the construction of their role and the actions in which they involve themselves, so researching and accessing the other can be represented as an attempt that no one has full control over, requiring the activation of constant reflective attention with respect to mutually exercised influences. The dash symbolises the fluid and plural character of our research and relationship with contexts, considering the fuzzy, reciprocal, and multiple-meaning nature of the boundaries set in place between the various actors of a research project. Such boundaries are permeated by the implications and consequent negotiations and transactions of power, role, and reference to interests and objectives whose clarification is the result of an emerging social construction. Each research, therefore, is part of a process of negotiation of the hyphen that unites/separates elements at play, configuring this space according to declinations affect both how the research itself is conceived, as in the cognitive objectives and the methodological choices made, and the identity of the researcher.

Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013) identify four areas of union/separation in this regard: internal-external; similar-different; involved-distant; politically active-active neutrality role. Each of them puts in place regulations that require negotiation and positioning among the stakeholders involved. The hypothesis suggested by the author is that such a positioning does not depend on a pre-established decision, but on the situated game of intertwining, conversations, emerging negotiations connected to situated expectations, interpretations, and needs. It is thus a mobile space-dash, which configures a capacity for reflection and constant adjustment of one's position with the other, with a view to building credibility, trust, mutual knowledge.

The third dimension concerns the possibility/need for forms of research oriented "from" and "to" confrontation with cognitive questions emerging from the concrete organizational scenarios and work experiences of the subjects, activating their elaboration in this regard. The generation of scientific problems arises from the socio-cultural contexts in which research is immersed and what to give relevance to varies according to different and plural interests, positions, perspectives.

The risk in these cases is one of instrumental enslavement and the loss of forms of research driven by amazement, surprise, and curiosity with respect to objects of investment and investigative interest, according to the distinction proposed by Alfred Schütz (1970) between "intrinsic" relevance and "imposed" relevance. However, the very reference to Schütz evokes the etymological meaning of the term "problem" (which refers to "what is thrown forward") and introduces the theme of sustainability of research generated by problems as not necessarily reducible to a subordinate form of investigation.

Paraphrasing Schütz, in this specific form of research we are in a position where the relevance imposed by contexts (actually negotiated and socially constructed) becomes intrinsic relevance, capable of moving investments, passion, and curiosity with respect to the possibility of producing meaningful, relevant and in dialogue with theoretical and conceptual backgrounds. A construct of evidence is emerging that feeds on multiple sources and which becomes practice-based evidence, as a social process of knowledge production, amplifying and articulating the references for accessing relevant and significant knowledge.

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Regarding the fourth dimension, we refer to Bartunek (2011) and Lower (2007): the first reference, in the light of a decade following the release of a monographic issue of the British Journal of Management (BJM) dedicated to the topic of reducing the gap between managerial practice and managerial research, asks whether the diffusion of Mode 2 had an impact and to what extent. Mode 2 is an approach to research and production of knowledge connected to organizational realities proposed by Gibbons et al. (1994) as an emblematic translation of concrete ways to hold together rigour and relevance, academic knowledge and practical knowledge, research and action. The expectation was that the new sensitivity aimed at reducing the distance between research and practice in the field of disciplines related to human resource management would generate a restructuring of academic institutions for a better offer and exchange of knowledge inspired by the emerging approach. Hence, new measures for the assessment of academic merit, support for executive PhD programs, and the creation of trans-disciplinary research journals and associations are expected to effectively answer questions generated by context-related problems (Bartunek, 2011, p. 556). The author concludes her exposition by arguing that there is still room for a certain optimism, despite the prevalence of a discussion on Mode 2 rather than a consistent advance in terms of research and empirical experiences enriching such cases and repertoires.

The second contribution (Lower, 2007) underlines how research work developed by academic faculties exceeds in a methodological rigour marked by complex statistical analysis, the relevance of which appears minimal or scarcely probable in terms of influence and support to managerial practices. While academic journals are full of articles with high impact and rigour but with little impact on practices, academic career paths depend on the number of articles published, rather than on research capable of influencing practice. Some colleagues believe in this regard that the fact of producing scientific knowledge that accesses highly impacted journals is in itself a condition of practical relevance. This is not Lower's position, who in his contribution to the Academy of Management Journal insists on underlining how the most recognised faculty members are recognised not for having published articles and books oriented to practical relevance: even in some cases they can be penalised in case they have published articles relating to practice, fuelling the suspicion that what constitutes a relevant subject for professional journals does not constitute good academic research.

This is a matter of how much the curriculum of an academic in the field of WOP should feature significant research experiences generated by the field; also, it calls into consideration which product, before publication, have returned, validated, and appreciated knowledge in the form of a report within an organizational context, on the basis of a previously agreed research project starting from a jointly identified problem. It would be interesting to include among the merit evaluation criteria also the presence of technical reports returned to organizations and which have been accepted and valued as expendable and actionable.

We hope that dedicating oneself to sensible, meaningful, valid, situated, and relevant research and intervention experiences will find acceptance and legitimacy in publication, communication channels, and evaluation criteria that today seem to reward above all (if not only) a prevalent mainstream in the way of conceiving the production of knowledge, its recognition, and its dissemination.

The aim of this Special issue is to highlight what can be done/what can be produced with/through qualitative data and methods. The papers presented highlight both significant knowledge generation processes and the use of the data produced in terms of relevance, impact, and application, opening new perspectives/glances/horizons/innovative goals for WOP, and expressing the multiplicity of methodological possibilities of qualitative research applied to WOP.

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