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The Nexus between Methods and Power in Sociological Research

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Abstract

This article develops an integrative perspective on the nexus between power and sociological research methods. By reflecting upon two of the most widely used methodological approaches in sociology – standardized survey research and qualitative interview research – we develop a comprehensive heuristic framework for examining the ways in which the use of sociological methods affects and intersects any social scientific practice: (1) the power effects that societies and institutional settings exert on methods and the use of methods, (2) power in the use and implementation of methods, and (3) the power effects that methods and the use of methods exert on societies and institutional settings.

Keywords Power · Methodological paradigms · Survey research · Qualitative interviews

Introduction

The analysis of and reflection upon societal power structures is one of the core tasks of sociology. It is a particular strength of the discipline that sociologists reflect upon the way in which their actions – and they themselves – are entangled with societal power relations. On the one hand, canonical authors as varied as Foucault (1970), Adorno (1976), and Bourdieu (1979) have critically argued that methods are not innocent instruments, but are based on social power relations. As such, methods can be involved in the production of societal power structures and, ultimately, in the very creation of the objects they aim to investigate. More recently, this perspective

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continues, for example, in the form of criticism of society's increasing quantification (Espeland & Yung, 2019) or in critical discussions of the politics of representation in qualitative research (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). On the other hand, since its early days, an explicit goal of empirical social research has been to raise public awareness about societal power relations, and consequently contribute to their alleviation. Thus, methodical instruments such as standardized surveys and qualitative interviews have also been perceived as means for revealing phenomena like social inequalities and societal injustice, notably enough already by early critical authors like Marx, Adorno, and Bourdieu. Today, activist research, as well as social movements and interest groups, mobilize social scientific methods as a means of empowerment and advancement. This includes, for example, 'stactivism' (Bruno et al., 2014) and quantitative feminism (Hughes & Cohen, 2013) or postcolonial accounts (Denzin et al., 2008). Both of these two rather contrary perspectives – the one critically emphasizing methods' entanglement with power and the one emphatically highlighting methods' empowering potential – shed light on what we will systematically conceptualize as the *power/method nexus*: power as the fundamental basis for and consequence of the application of every sociological method. Depending on one's standpoint (Mannheim, 1936; Harding, 2004), a particular instance of the power/method nexus can present itself in different ways, for instance, as empowering, qualifying, enforcing, weakening, suppressing, destructive, constructive, or as both positive and negative at the same time.

Going beyond particularistic judgments, we base our contribution on three fundamental aspects that are problematic to the extent that social scientists are unaware of them or do not possess the instruments to engage with them. First, an *ontic aspect*: methods can powerfully¹ influence and contribute to the very creation of the object of study that we may sometimes believe to be merely observing. Second, a *societal aspect*: Methods can be applied according to specific – implicit or explicit – interests or conventions, which can facilitate empowerment but also the reproduction of social inequalities. Third, an *ethical aspect*: Findings based on and legitimized by the use of methods can have unintended effects despite or even as a result of a researcher's ethical stance.

We propose an innovative heuristic framework to provide a general overview and a practical orientation of the ways in which power, in its different conceptions and scopes, can be associated with the use of methods. Traditionally, research on the relations between methods and power is scattered across specialized methodological traditions, with a particularly distinct opposition between quantitative and qualitative approaches (Williams et al., 2017). Even more fundamentally, sociology is divided regarding the very concept of power itself, that is, according to what is – theoretically – understood as 'power', as well as regarding what is – normatively – conceived of as the negative or positive consequences of relations between power and methods. Due to this fragmentation, there is little to no knowledge exchange between the different paradigmatic communities. If at all, researchers usually only reflect on the ways the use of their specific methods may be affected by and contribute to societal power

¹ We use the term "powerful" in the specific sense that it refers to power-related effects, not simply as an amplifier.

structures. Hence, the all-important reflection on the relation between method-based research and power continues to be performed in parallel, unrelated sub-discourses to this day, each engaged in their particular immediate problems related to specific ethical and technical issues.

This paper aims to transcend such paradigmatic divides and obstacles by establishing the power/method nexus as a challenge that concerns sociology as a whole and by providing a systematic overview of how power can interrelate with research that involves the use of methods. For this purpose, we will go beyond a particular method and draw on two of the most important methodological paradigms within empirical social research as examples: *standardized survey research and the corresponding statistical analyses* (SSR) as a broad family of approaches in traditional quantitative social research, and *qualitative interview research and the methods of analysis that have been closely associated with it* (QIR) as a broad family of approaches in qualitative social research. We develop a heuristic to systematize how the perspectives and insights of the respective methodological ‘other’ can provide concrete and valuable insights for one’s own research practice. In doing so, we employ a pluralist notion of power and illustrate the various ways in which power, in different theoretical contexts and on different analytical levels, forms a nexus with these two methodological paradigms and, in fact, any method-based approach.

Going beyond current examinations of relations between methods and power, which are mostly particularistic and concerned with specific methods and specific power effects, our contribution employs an integrative perspective to provide empirical sociologists with a *sensitizing tool*: a pragmatic heuristic that enables researchers to systematically establish the ways power and the specific methods they use can affect and intersect with each other.

The Power/Method Nexus: two Ideal-Types

In the following chapters, we examine and systematize the ways power can co-occur with two prominent ideal-typical methodological families that are of utmost relevance in the social sciences: standardized survey research (SSR) (e.g., open or closed, face-to-face or online, etc.) and qualitative interview research (QIR) (e.g., open biographical interviews, semi-standardized, ethnographic, or expert interviews).² In doing so, we deliberately apply a broad and pluralist understanding of power, and mobilize different sociological perspectives (cp. Clegg & Haugaard, 2009). In other words, we do not define *a priori* how a specific, narrow notion of power might be interrelated with methods and the different actors involved in their application. Rather, power will be understood as a generic concept, a capacity to exert an influence within relational constellations on and between various societal levels and entities. We will take into account different analytical levels (from individual traits to characteristics of society;

² Evidently, these families neither comprise homogeneous nor fully distinct approaches, as they are characterized by several internal variants and as both families often intersect and overlap. Yet, remarkably, methodological debates and practices proceed along the demarcation line of ‘quantitative vs. qualitative’ methods more often than not (cp. Schwemmer & Wiczorek, 2019).

from micro-situations of experiencing to far-reaching social structures; from a ‘fixed-sum’ view to a ‘variable-sum’ view with power potentially increasing or decreasing; from a conflict perspective to a perspective of social and system integration), different directions of power’s influences, and opposing value stances (enabling or restricting, legitimate authority or illegitimate exertion of influence, producing social justice or reproducing power differentials). According to this perspective, methods have a power potential that can be actualized or not, used or misused, recognized or not recognized, and welcomed or criticized. Importantly, however, we understand power as a genuine social phenomenon, which means that we do not limit ourselves to power in the sense of the capabilities of an acting subject. Rather, in the sense of the social life of methods (Ruppert et al., 2013), we also take into account the mechanisms through which the power of methods is actualized trans-intentionally, i.e., without any corresponding subjective intention. Based on a relational conception of reality, we thus also understand power in the sense of its production in constellations of objects, actors, and organizations, infrastructures, far-reaching causal chains and, overall, social fields. Based on this flexible conceptualization of power, we will illustrate for specific research contexts how power can manifest in different ways when it comes to the use of methods in academic research. Comparing and reflecting on SSR and QIR as two methodological ideal-types, we will establish a general heuristic to employ a comprehensive understanding of the various levels on and aspects in which power and methods can interrelate. This heuristic comprises three analytically differentiated dimensions: the power effects that societal and institutional settings exert on methods and the use of methods, power in the use and implementation of methods, and the power effects that methods and the use of methods exert on societies and institutional settings. Although these dimensions are analytically distinct, they describe closely intertwined processes that actualize and re-actualize the nexus between methods and power iteratively, jointly, and interdependently.³

Societies’ Power Effects on Methods

A first central dimension of the relationship between power and methods comprises the effects that modern differentiated societies and institutional settings exert on the conditions and forms of the use of methods. First of all, the relevance of the *economic field* has been discussed in this context. Perhaps most noteworthy, SSR and QIR emerged out of capitalist structures, their cultural logic of utilization and institutional settings. For SSR, it has been extensively discussed how this specific societal configuration has been influencing method-based research. Sprague & Zimmerman (1989, p. 78) describe SSR as a research tradition that is “deeply marked” by capitalist agendas. Criticizing the close ties between SSR and the economy, Adorno (1976) argues that the logic of market research as implied in survey research involves the risk of diminishing research’s potential for scientific enlightenment (cp. Durand, 2016). Another, yet genuinely related context can be seen in *cultural fields*. More

³ This processual perspective on methods has been established and usefully employed by the social life of methods approach (cp. Savage, 2013; Law et al., 2011).

recently, Law (2009, p. 249) shows that surveys conceptualize the consumer as an individual rational-ethical subject and thereby constitute their objects of analysis as moral entities. Similarly, QIR's embeddedness in western "dialogical culture" (Kvale, 2006, p. 492; cp. Brinkmann & Kvale 2005, p. 162) has been argued to render it highly connectable to modern consumer society. Qualitative interviews are used in entertainment, during job interviews in the professional sphere, or in a medical context for diagnostic and therapeutic purposes, which is why Atkinson & Silverman (1997) even speak of an "interview society". The dialogical form of interviews can be perceived as part of an overarching culture in which power relations are mediated through seemingly authentic and egalitarian dialogs (Kvale, 2006). Whereas SSR conceptualizes the respondent as a rational subject, QIR draws the picture of an authentic subject by addressing authenticity, experiences, identities, lifestyles – which have become typical facets of subjectivity in western consumer societies. In both cases, the methods' societal value and potential are derived from what is perceived as SSR's and QIR's methodical virtues – the appearance of objectivity and neutrality in the case of SSR, and the ability to produce compelling narratives and contribute to social justice in the case of QIR.

Another aspect of how modern differentiated societies and institutional settings impact on the conditions and forms of method use is grounded in both methods' traditions of *embeddedness in political fields, i.e., political orders, political regimes, and political economies*. Desrosières (2009) examines the interplay between different political regimes and the forms of statistics they require and employ in order to ensure political control (cp. Law et al., 2011). In this context, SSR played – and continues to play – a constitutive role in the emergence and stabilization of western nation-states. The storage of data and their statistical analysis enabled political actors to improve the management of populations on a broad scale (Rose, 1999, p. 30; Foucault, 2007; Savage, 2010). As Igo (2008) shows, surveys were installed as a permanent technology of US democracy in the 20th century. Later, surveys were introduced to other countries, such as post-war Germany, to make democratic opinion-building possible. More recently, they have become a social technology that contributes to the operability of the EU research bureaucracy (Kropp, 2018). This relationship between politics and methods is less commonly studied for QIR in western countries. However, there are comparable findings for other cultures. For example, as Li (2021, p. 3) suggests for the case of elite interviews in China, "the elite interviewee's sphere of influence – national or local – is crucial to shaping interview access and power dynamics." Similarly, Ryan & Tynen (2020) show that QIR embedded in China's culture of surveillance impacts on the core issue of trust and rapport.

Yet, in western countries, political influence on the opportunities to conduct QIR is – to a great extent – mediated through the institutions and policies of the academic field. As part of its national and political embeddedness, the *academic field and its institutional landscape* have a quite fundamental impact on how SSR and QIR are employed. Being subjected to the expectations of science and higher education policies, funding strategies and policies, and organizational policies and strategies at higher education institutions, SSR and QIR are, to a great extent, *powerfully* structured by political and economic conditions. The institutional conditions of the academic field are highly relevant, as they enable research by providing the necessary

means and resources for empirical investigations. Yet, in doing so, these conditions also shape and constrain the legitimate forms of method-based research. University review boards and funding agencies favor specific topics and approaches, so that specific methods have a higher probability of receiving funding – either due to their methodological characteristics (e.g., being more ‘objective’) or due to their potential for generating policy advice. SSR has traditionally benefited from the societal need for evidence, which, over a long time, led to its relative success in funding; QIR, on the other hand, often had problems in conforming to such expectations on the part of third-party funders (Mykhalovskiy et al., 2008). However, as Flinders (2013, p. 621) argues for both methodological families in recent years, the relationship between the social sciences and the “broader social sphere is changing as greater pressure is placed on academics to demonstrate the social relevance and public impact of their research”. This “tyranny of relevance” (ibid.) has considerable consequences for QIR in particular insofar as qualitative research faces the pressure to adopt to the very logics of impact and relevance that SSR seems to be better adjusted to. Another and perhaps more subtle example of how the institutional setting of the academic field can impact on the ways method-based research is designed is given by McCormack et al., (2012), who show that ethics boards expect to be provided in advance with information about the concrete ethical implications of, for example, an interview situation. This, however, runs counter to the logic of QIR, as researchers will often only be able to identify a particular problem when it occurs.

The use of methods is not only dependent on institutional conditions in the academic field, but also on who actually mobilizes and implements a method. This leads us to a perspective on *embeddedness via social groups* and the power effects thus involved. Different groups differ in their propensities to prefer or reject certain research techniques, they can link explicit interests or more implicit attitudes with the application of a method, and they can hold assumptions and notions about how society is constituted and if or how it needs to be changed. Such preconditions can impact the ways a method is designed – be it in forms of middle-class ethics in survey items or progressive ethics in guided interviews. In the context of SSR, there are examples of surveys being explicitly used by social groups for their own benefit. For example, Boltanski (1984) demonstrates how professional associations have implemented survey categories for political representation and mobilization work in France. On the other hand, societal embeddedness via social groups is also relevant in the case of political actions by numerous advocacy groups and social movements who employ methods to address and represent the interests of others. For instance, discussing the embeddedness of methodologies via social groups, Gouldner (1971) emphasizes the interplay of gender and class. Indeed, gender can influence the choice of methods in a fundamental way. Empirically, this can already be illustrated by the fact that women, on average, tend to utilize qualitative methods more frequently than men (Grant et al., 1987, 2002), while men use unconventional methods more often than women (Koppman & Leahey, 2019). Beyond that, the choice of research topics and the methods of their investigation can implicitly “support sexist values”, as Oakley (1998, p. 709) argues. However, the gender aspect cannot be interpreted as an intrinsic property of gender identities or the methods themselves. It must rather be understood as an expression of prevailing, gender-specific power hierarchies, which translate into

gender-specific choices of methods, as well as into the ways these methods are practically employed – a dimension we will examine in the next step.

Power in the Use and Implementation of Methods

For both SSR and QIR, issues of power arise during the implementation and application of methods. This second central dimension of the relationship between power and methods starts with the *stage of conceptualization*, i.e., the process throughout which instruments such as questionnaires and interview guidelines are constructed. In this stage, direct and indirect interventions resulting from the societal and institutional settings and dispositions mentioned above can become influential. With regard to SSR, it has been shown that survey researchers translate societal issues to specific problems, questions, and categories, before giving them a particular form (e.g., categories for respondents to choose from) and technically implementing them in web interfaces or written questionnaires (cp. Ruppert et al., 2013; Law et al., 2011; Diaz-Bone & Didier, 2016, p. 16). In this context, the construction of surveys is not independent from the researchers' backgrounds, as discussed above. Surveys often "reflect the views and interests of dominant groups within society – a powerful elite that is usually white, male and middle-class" (Henn et al., 2009, p. 125f). For the US, Banks (1988) contends that middle-class sociologists often tend to construct labels that are differentiated for their own milieu while categories for a purportedly all-encompassing underclass are much less differentiated. Similarly, for France, Pinçon and Pinçon (2018) show that the researchers' own class backgrounds are largely responsible for their heightened research interest in the dominated classes, while simultaneously painting rather vague images of societal elites through their surveys.

In contrast to SSR, QIR is characterized by a particular openness and flexibility in the stage of conceptualization. This methodological openness, however, can lead to the research framework being receptive for moral orientations. Explicit moral frameworks may be seen as beneficial. Yet QIR's openness and flexibility can create a systematic problem if the categories researchers apply when assembling, analyzing, and transcribing interview data remain implicit (Savage, 2013, p. 17). Critical psychologists have addressed this issue of the researchers' (often implicit) moralized frameworks under the term "qualitative ethicism" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005, p. 163), claiming that ethical and cultural orientations of researchers can exert soft power on participants through dialog, empathy, and intimacy. Open questions, in particular, leave ample opportunity for the interviewers' latent and partially unconscious standards to be exerted upon the interviewee and the situation (Kvale, 2006; Wang, 2006). To the degree that QIR is not based on strict rules and procedures, but rather on tacit knowledge, it is susceptible to the influence of institutional and cultural backgrounds, as well as ethical and moral orientations, which can shape its analytical frameworks (cp. Leahey, 2008, p. 38).

In comparison to SSR, power issues take a similar, yet more implicit form in QIR. In SSR, power is predominantly an issue of explicit, predefined categories that are grounded in institutions or scientists' dispositions and may not correspond with the respondents' cognitive or ideological categories. However, SSR not only involves

explicit categories that may diverge from the respondents' views; as with QIR, it also involves several underlying implicit (e.g., normative) categories and, more fundamentally, an implied logic of free choice, which is often presented through the form of standardized questions and which thereby obscures the fact that the actors under investigation do not actually enjoy freedom of choice (to the same extent).

In the second stage of using and implementing methods, *power asymmetries between interviewer and interviewee* are particularly evident. In a way, such constellations are to be expected from the relationship between professional and laypeople roles: Without the researchers' authority, expertise, and professionalism, respondents will scarcely be able to develop trust. Thus, the researchers' authority can often be understood as a productive and welcome form of power. However, power can also be exerted in less favorable ways. During the interaction of an interview, the actors involved can also unintentionally reproduce existing power relations. For SSR, focus group research shows that respondents can feel marginalized when they do not find themselves and their perceptions reflected in survey items (Boehm et al., 2013) and interview studies show that respondents can feel inferior to interviewers (cp. Peneff 1988, p. 520). Traditionally, such phenomena are known from the context of class differentials between interviewers and interviewees (Fein, 1971; Garbarski et al., 2016; Bourdieu, 1996). Resulting asymmetries may bias the ways in which interviewers ask their questions, and influence the interviewees' compliance and response behaviors (Warren & Halpern-Manners, 2012; Mistiaen & Ravallion, 2003). For example, members of less privileged classes are often particularly compelled to conform to social desirability. As a case in point, 'No opinion' is more often recorded for disadvantaged people, and their possibly existing opinion is thus excluded very early on, as Barth and Schmitz (2018) show for the US. Actors with academic backgrounds, on the other hand, tend to actively use questionnaires as a medium for expressing their opinion (ibid.). Another important example for power asymmetries in SSR concerns the dimension of gender. Ahl (2007) shows how surveys, which often implicitly query male performance norms, can 'second-sex' women and define them as the stereotypical other. More fundamentally, for a long time (and still today), survey research has been employing the binary category of 'gender'. When confronted with these exclusively binary categories, respondents have to either submit to this heteronormative logic or respond with a 'Don't know' (which renders non-binary genders invisible).

In the context of QIR, power differences in the interaction between interviewer and interviewee are more extensively discussed. Such differences already arise from pre-defined roles such as 'participant' and 'respondent' or 'co-researcher' and 'co-participant'. Again, as a feature of the profession, QIR researchers have a certain authority deriving from their scientific expertise and their well-meaning intentions, which are supposed to contribute positively to the respondents' agency. In addition, authors highlight QIR's potential to create a non-threatening environment, facilitating "a feeling of empathy for informants" that enables "people [to] open up about their feelings" (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 58; see also Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009; Dodson et al., 2007). Yet an interview situation is still shaped by the backgrounds of the actors involved, which can reproduce societal power relations between interviewee and interviewer (Bourdieu, 1996; Schiek, 2017). As a result of the pre-defined roles in QIR, such power asymmetries can foster unilateral control over the interview situ-

ation (Haworth, 2006; Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). Such power differentials can lead to potential feelings of disappointment or even exploitation on the respondents' side (Roura, 2021). Open interview forms can be less compatible with the social and cultural backgrounds, and thus with the habitual dispositions, of interviewees from less privileged classes (Richardson et al., 1965, p. 149). This pattern is illustrated by studies suggesting that the interaction with interviewers from academic backgrounds can be experienced as uncomfortable by interviewees, for example, because the production of longer narratives as responses to open questions is unfamiliar to them (Mao & Feldman, 2019).

Both SSR and QIR can also *empower research subjects* because in both cases, the use of methods can give respondents a voice and make their situation and interests visible. Being interviewed and – even more so – being involved in the implementation of a survey can contribute to the subjective virtue of being heard and the empowerment of people. Whereas this is often formulated as an explicit goal in QIR, SSR focusing on, for example, issues of social justice, is just starting to understand how micro situations (leading, e.g., to more open categories) may empower respondents. The subjective virtue of giving people a voice and empowering them is why many projects concerned with social justice use QIR and SSR in co-productive frameworks to further such goals.

Although the goal of empowering research subjects and giving them a voice is noble in principle, the notion of empowerment can still feature an *inherent power-driven moralism* that forces interviewees into the subject position of an empowered individual with an authentic voice (cp. Gallagher, 2008). The 'empowerment' of research objects can exert pressure on respondents to make use of specific notions of freedom (such as disengaging from gender stereotypes). While the idea of empowerment might thus seem as self-evidently 'good' in the academic milieu, it could be experienced quite differently by interviewees in other milieus. Thus, the widespread norms of respect and equality can themselves undermine ethical principles and mask power differentials between interviewers and interviewees (Stacey, 1988). As a consequence, QIR can become an instrument of personal confession that motivates participants to develop and express those feelings that might be appreciated by the researcher and to suppress feelings not deemed to comply with the researcher's theoretical and ideological assumptions and moral stances (Shachak, 2018, p. 222).

While QIR sensitizes us for power asymmetries in terms of immediate manipulation, control, and the enactment of specific roles, SSR highlights how power asymmetries can influence the behavior of respondents in terms of biased responses and that phenomena such as nonresponse or invalid answers may well be understood in the context of power differentials and relations.

However, power relations in interview situations are not one-sided, but ambivalent and can, in fact, take a different direction. Thus, we also have to take into account the *power of the researched over the researcher*. In SSR, respondents are far from powerless: Researchers depend on the respondents' commitment to participate and their willingness to accept the logic of the items. Respondents can refuse or give misleading answers or even react in explicitly political terms to a survey. Hence, power might be exerted by survey respondents, manifesting in phenomena such as respondents' unwillingness and non-compliance, which can be interpreted as acts of pow-

erful resistance. For example, Desrosières (2015) showed that, in France, specific groups consciously turned against the survey instrument and critically questioned the political intentions of the interviewers, as well as the legitimacy of the instrument.

Likewise, in the case of QIR, the research situation gives interviewees multiple opportunities to exert power, from terminating the interview (Anyan, 2013; cp. Koi-vunen, 2010) to refusing to speak (Torbenfeldt & Fynbo, 2018) to “enforced waiting” (Palmer et al., 2017). Beyond that, respondents in powerful social positions can control access to their fields or intimidate researchers during the interview situation (cp. Li, 2021). Conti and O’Neil (2007) emphasize that power relations can challenge not only interviewees, but also interviewers themselves, who are vulnerable and exposed to power and status imbalances, for example, when interacting with interviewees with a high socioeconomic status. Bashir (2020, p. 667) contends that “the researcher becomes the ‘vulnerable’” and may fear being on “unfamiliar territory”, given the “unpredictability of participants”. Here, the aforementioned cultural dimension of differences can come into play again. For example, Heikkilä and Katainen (2021) show that, in qualitative interviews, taste distinctions are important indicators of power relations and an important cause of respondents’ counter-talk.

In the next stage of employing methods, both SSR’s and QIR’s respective instruments entail specific meaning-laden forms that can exert power by *producing, disseminating, and imposing contingent categories during the analysis*. Empirical researchers use devices and instruments in ways that do not merely allow them to discover their analytical units, but actually contribute to creating them as part of the analysis itself. In both cases, as a result of this process, contingent constructions become naturalized and objectified, so that they are often perceived as objective information for the final recipient (such as political decision makers).

For SSR, this formative process can be referred to using the term ‘in-formation’ (Desrosières, 2009), which describes the production of unified categories and quantities during the analysis and, ultimately, the production of quantities, via the process of ‘quantification’. Once a survey is conducted, completed questionnaires are further processed, mostly within institutional contexts. Passing through “statistical production chains” (Desrosières, 2009, p. 213), questionnaires become transformed into data and, eventually, information. Desrosières (2002) uses the concept of statistical production chains to describe procedures that transfer both the heterogeneous actors’ traits and the actors themselves into a single type of entity (i.e., a statistical unit). These entities are then sorted along unified dimensions, such as survey items. As a consequence, actors that actually differ on unobserved dimensions are ascribed the same analytical weight. It is this methodical transformation of different entities into a unified reference frame that makes them comparable and commensurable and that ultimately yields categories and quantities. Consequently, SSR does not merely measure, but it actively contributes to constructing social reality (Penissat et al., 2016, p. 136). According to this view, the definition of categories, the categorization of answers at the interpretative stage, and the statistical construction of objects all involve epistemic power (cp. Foucault, 1979), and as such can all be understood as part of a “political economy of statistics” (Diaz-Bone & Didier 2016, p. 7). Yet possible power effects are often ‘invisibilized’ in the process of knowledge production throughout the statistical chain: The political definition of a category is often taken by

researchers at face value just as – vice versa – the findings thus gained are understood by politicians as ‘objective’. The statistical analysis of survey data is a prime example of ‘quantification’: Basic statistics (e.g., means), figures and graphs, regression parameters, and classification models bring averaged cases into being and contribute to a vision of the normal. Gillborn (2010) illustrates how statisticians in the course of data analysis – for example, by using control variables in regression models – can evoke the impression that inequalities between ethnic groups are negligible. Likewise, multivariate techniques can unintendedly become part of the creation of the very entities they are supposed to be measuring, as they provide researchers with considerable reductions in complexity and, if interpreted ‘realistically’ (i.e., without reflecting on their highly constructive nature), with powerful simplifications and classifications of social reality. For example, Perrotta and Williamson (2018) show how cluster analysis can contribute to the belief in the existence of groups.

While scholarship on QIR facilitates similar insights into the production of meaning and representation, we suggest to further emphasize the parallels with SSR by referring to the productive formation of units of analysis with the term ‘qualification’. While power in SSR becomes particularly visible in the collectivistic organization of analysis, power in QIR manifests most clearly in the individualistic character of the analysis, i.e., in the researcher’s interpretational monopoly. Through their “monopoly of interpretation” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005, p. 165; cp. Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009) when working with data, researchers define what interviewees ‘actually’ wanted to say and decide which parts of a narrative deserve closer attention. Roura (2021, p.3) argues that “divergences between laypeople and academic experts are – perhaps unconsciously but still patronizingly – framed as wrong beliefs, lack of awareness, or poor literacy of the former”. As a result, narrative competences can even be ‘invisibilized’ for those interviewees who resist the researchers’ preconceptions and moralized analytical frameworks (cp. Järvinen 2000, p. 389). For example, Spencer et al. (2020, p. 1) show for research on children’s health “how dominant relations of power are (re)produced within and across research spaces, and through the mobilizing or pathologizing of particular young voices through research” so that qualitative research is involved in the “production and legitimation of particular voices as being ‘correct’ ways of knowing”. Spencer et al. further show how QIR can result in a significant imbalance in data generated across different groups because the piecing together of more disjointed or shorter interviews was less amenable to conventional coding processes. Drawing a parallel to the statistical production chains studied for SSR, one can also pay attention to the production chains for ‘qualified’ knowledge in QIR. For example, interpretation groups jointly negotiate and value interpretations and thus collectively produce ‘plausible’ meaning (Berli, 2021) which is then taken up and circulated. Such a perspective on production chains in QIR is becoming more and more important to the degree that QIR is increasingly realized throughout a process that involves different steps and actors (cp. Ellinger et al., 2005; Pardee et al., 2017; Wuchty et al., 2007).

Some of the power issues that we have raised in this chapter do not extend beyond the use and implementation of methods and can be sufficiently described within temporally and locally confined situations. However, some aspects transcend the imme-

ciate situation and translate into societal power relations, towards which we will now direct our attention.

Methods' Societal Power Effects

When it comes to the power effects that the use of methods may exert on society, we must differentiate between intended and unintended effects, or, for that matter, effects that might be perceived as desirable or undesirable, depending on one's standpoint. In fact, to a large part, SSR and QIR were historically developed and employed to *exert desired societal effects*. For many decades, SSR has been associated with ideas and ideals of democracy, above all in the context of opinion polls (cp. Savage, 2010; Igo, 2008). The technical innovations in SSR – for example, representative sampling from sampling frames – made it possible to shed light on inequality and injustice. If used with the respective intention, SSR can reveal and eventually challenge existing power structures (Bruno et al., 2014). This enabling power proved to be productive for observing and valuing public opinion in the US and UK (cp. Osborne & Rose, 1999, p. 385). As discussed above, this has made SSR attractive for political and economic authorities, who have associated SSR's power to enlighten society with what is understood to be SSR's analytical virtues. Even today, scholars ascribe surveys a “certain degree of ‘neutrality’ and ‘objectivity’”, making them a powerful “tool for critique and defence of policy paradigms” (Boehm et al., 2013, p. 312). Illustrating this potential, authors have argued that the statistical analysis of survey data can further our understanding of the dynamics that underlie processes of selection and exclusion and produce inequalities and injustices (Scott, 2010). Authorities utilize information derived from both census and university-based research “to plan jobs and training” [...] “roads and transport”, and “services and facilities for long-term sick and elderly people.” (Census Leaflet, quoted in Thomas, 1996, 4.4). Yet SSR has also been used by social movements, advocacy groups, and NGOs cooperating with scientists to realize specific desired policies such as information on sexism or racism. Like SSR, QIR has often been employed to bring about certain desirable societal effects, such as empowering research participants, thus giving a voice to marginalized groups, subjects, and perspectives (cp. Cannella, 2015), and it is no coincidence that contemporary social justice movements often use QIR for these purposes (cp. Lyons et al., 2013). In recent times, participatory research that strives to “give power” (Gallagher, 2008, p. 142; cp. Bourke 2009) has grown in importance and become part of an overarching communicative culture in western societies, as discussed above. Yet, despite their official function and numerous examples for positive societal effects, both SSR and QIR can impact negatively on society. Specifically, the enlightening potential inherent in the methods, which is – at its core – an epistemological power, can have undesirable and unintended effects, as we shall discuss now.

SSR and QIR exert an *epistemological power of representation* by producing societal phenomena through depicting and visualizing specific issues while making other issues and phenomena invisible. Empirical insights from SSR can bias representations of social groups (or classes) and ideologies, and thus make visible – or invisible – the social in specific ways (Scott, 2010; Horvath, 2019). In doing so, standardized

surveys can reproduce dominant perspectives on how the nature of the social is to be conceived and which (and whose) social problems are seen as legitimate points of reference for political interventions (Boehm et al., 2013). This concerns, amongst other things, categories of race or sex: In the context of the US Census, Anderson and Fienberg (2000) reconstruct the historical process of creating the statistical category ‘Asian’, which henceforth obscured the group of people of Vietnamese descent. A prime example of SSR’s contribution to the political and social legitimacy of categories is the gender dimension we discussed in the context of the methods’ implementation. Stereotypical items can be instrumental in the legitimization of the hierarchy between men and women just as binary gender categories can render third and non-binary gender identities invisible.

Similar issues regarding the (re-)production of specific epistemological orientations can be raised about QIR, which operates less via strictly defined categories and is usually more open and flexible. It is this very flexibility that allows certain latent ethical and moral orientations – for example, about empowered subjects – to diffuse into the research process and exert epistemological effects in society. As we saw above, storytelling and narratives can have the effect of turning the self ‘inside out’ and making it the central reference of narratives. In this sense, qualitative interviews can co-create a subject with an authentic voice, thereby forcing it into confessional dialogs, and reproducing cultural hierarchies (cp. Kvale, 2006; Gubrium & Holstein, 2012). From this point of view, the dialogical form of interviews can be perceived as part of an overarching culture in which power relations are mediated through authentic and (seemingly) egalitarian dialogs (Kvale, 2006). Another case of latent ethical and moral orientations diffusing into the research process is given by Spencer et al., (2020, p. 3–4), who report a case of research on children where qualitative researchers privilege “particular voices (and silence others)”, a tendency that “downplays the diversity and individuality of children” and is said to reproduce existing social inequalities by aiding children from socioeconomically advantaged areas who were “particularly apt and articulate” to find their voice. Such knowledge produced through both QIR and SSR can frame specific political decisions or entire worldviews (cp. Espeland & Yung, 2019).

In doing so, both SSR and QIR contribute to *discursive constellations and ideologies*, which, in turn, can be involved in far-reaching powerful effects. In the context of SSR, Desrosières (2002) demonstrates that politics and statistics represent reciprocal sources of legitimacy. By collaborating with political authority, (survey) statisticians are able to gain societal acceptance and credibility. Conversely, policies across the political spectrum can derive legitimacy from using statistics, prominently via opinion polls (Igo, 2008). As SSR can provide standardized knowledge about society, its political implementation facilitates governmental control such as agenda setting (cp. Savage, 2010). Established categories and findings derived from SSR can provide a basis for the conceptualization of societal and political problems (cp. Durand, 2016) and thus for specific state policies and interventions. For example, the methodically produced, ostensible singularity of ‘the public opinion’ can legitimize certain policies and ultimately consolidate societal power relations (cp. Bourdieu, 1979). Consequently, the concept of public opinion can be interpreted as a technically produced and legitimized illusion: The political subject does not represent the origin of

power, but rather an object of discursive manipulation and ideological control exerted by survey techniques (Champagne, 1990). Thus, as Champagne (1990) and Lipari (2000) show on the basis of discourse analyses, respondents do not simply express an individual opinion but respond in surveys to prior discursive concepts. Their answers are then aggregated and interpreted as scientifically validated public opinion. Similarly, Savage (2010) shows how SSR has contributed to the construction of Europe as an isomorphic population of individuals and Penissat and Rowell (2015) illustrate how the harmonized socio-economic classification scheme became a reference for discourses of inequality within EU institutions. Beyond national frames, surveys have been used to compare different national societies on a global scale. Surveys built for the purpose of comparing different societies provide references for political decision-makers. In doing so, they can further the unification and standardization of different nation-states, and, eventually, stabilize the idea of the nation-state in the global context (cp. Schmitz et al. 2015).

One can identify further institutional settings on which SSR exerts power effects: For example, the media field represent an important institutional setting for the dissemination of worldviews derived from SSR. Slobodian (2019) illustrates how journalists personalize and stereotype statistical findings from surveys. The educational system translates method-based knowledge. For example, Schilling (2018) examines how categories of social inequalities used in standardized surveys are taken up by students in the classroom. Children also obtain a sense of their place in a symbolic order from statistical findings. Girls with immigrant backgrounds, for example, may identify with the statistically represented image of their ethnicity (Schilling, 2018). Similarly, nations are inscribed into pupils as quasi-natural “collectivities” (Law et al., 2011, p. 5; cp. Piaget & Weil, 1951). This knowledge can affect the mindset of the population under study in a variety of ways. Likewise, Savage (2010) shows that the categories of social inequalities introduced in SSR in the UK after the Second World War are now used by people themselves. The knowledge of SSR also affects how we perceive other people in everyday life. Gastelaars (2002, p.8), speaking of practices of “stigmatization by statistical association”, observes that people draw on statistical types to classify others and turn probabilities into causalities.

Societal effects that emerge from discursive constellations and ideologies co-produced by QIR are particularly evident in the context of political activism and, concomitantly, the reinforcement of social policies. To the degree to which QIR can be conceived of as a moral technology of subjectivation as argued above, it can facilitate practices of self-formation by establishing softer forms of power. Such forms of power can have the effect of controlling subjects via emotions, empathy, and intimacy. Applied in management, education, and academic research, qualitative interviews have been considered an important element of western dialogical culture, and to convey freedom and authenticity (Kvale, 2006). In doing so, they can become instruments for “governing the soul” (Rose, 1999, p. 71) and thus contribute to societal power relations (cp. Brinkmann & Kvale 2005). Following this view, to the degree to which QIR is a technology of subjectivation, it fosters the emphasis of personal responsibility and individualizes societal issues like marginalization and discrimination (cp. Pollack, 2003). Similarly, examining the link between socio-political agendas and urban ethnography, Wacquant (2002) discusses how ethnographic interviews

individualize urban marginality and racial division in an effort to attract sympathy for the social figures they describe. In doing so, interview research can obscure the fact that social dereliction and human misery are not merely a matter of individual destiny, but must also be understood as resulting from societal power differentials and social policies.

QIR can impact on political discourses not only based on its findings, but also on the specific form it conveys. Natow (2022) analyzes policy actors' perceptions of QIR in policymaking and contends that qualitative research often faces challenges with obtaining visibility and influence in the development of regulatory policy. Yet she also describes how storytelling based on QIR can influence policy actors' perspectives about the content of policies thanks to its aesthetic and emphatic form.

Thus, overall, SSR and QIR can contribute in manifold ways to the *legitimation of discourses*, world views, social and political issues, and standpoints. Although relying on different techniques, we find both methodological families to evince specific ways of societal legitimization that are conducive to the formation of the modern subject (cp. Foucault, 2010) and its practices (cp. Savage, 2010), as well as its role in overarching political economy and societal relations that could be labeled 'governmentality' (cp. Rose, 1999). Both SSR and QIR affect, and can even co-create, legitimate opinion and knowledge by providing the informational foundation and legitimation of political ideologies, a knowledge that is perceived by many as scientific, objective, and ideologically unbiased.

Discussion and Outlook

As a multi-paradigmatic discipline, sociology provides us with a plurality of ways to reflect upon the conditions and consequences of our own scientific practice. Yet the different and often antagonistic methodological paradigms usually focus on those power aspects that align with their particular scientific worldviews and that they can grasp with their respective epistemic instruments. Moreover, researchers who reflect upon practical issues such as ethical implications and technical challenges of applying methods are usually others than those engaged in the abstract work of theorizing power. This situation is unfortunate, because the power/method nexus we have brought into focus in this paper must be understood as a genuine 'social fact' that affects and intersects any social scientific practice. Consequently, the systematic reflection upon relations between power and methods is neither a matter of mere personal self-reflexivity nor of a single paradigmatic camp, but rather a collective task for the sociological profession as a whole.

This paper aimed to address this deficit and establish the general scope of the power/method nexus by abstracting from one-sided preconceptions of how power and methods interrelate. For this purpose, we scrutinized two ideal-types of empirical social research that represent well-established, thoroughly developed, and widespread methodological families, which are often seen as opposite or even antithetic paradigms: standardized survey research and the corresponding statistical analyses (SSR), and qualitative interview research and the methods of analysis that have been closely associated with it (QIR). We systematically integrated empirical insights

gained from reflecting on both types of research into a coherent and comprehensive framework, comprising different notions and mechanisms of power. The resulting framework analytically differentiates three main dimensions: (1) the power effects that societies and institutional settings exert on methods and the use of methods (2) power in the use and implementation of methods, and (3) the power effects that methods and the use of methods exert on societies and institutional settings. Further research can build on this framework by empirically reconstructing the dimensions and underlying mechanisms derived here. Such empirical work can shed more light on the specific forms and conditions under which such phenomena arise (and when they do not) and facilitate discoveries of new and perhaps more opaque cases of the power/method nexus and, crucially, of the way it unfolds in non-western societies and non-democratic political systems.

Our concept should not be mistaken as grounds for indifference or fatalism. Criticism must not be an end in itself, or paralyze research, but rather support researchers in providing the means to reflection (cp. Burawoy 2005, p. 10): While our framework suggests that power and methods are to be seen as fundamentally intersecting, we also showed that power, as implied in method use, is not problematic *per se*, since it often entails desirable societal change rather than oppression. Yet, to the very degree that social scientists do not merely want to analyze society but rather to have a societal impact – be it through empowerment or direct political actions – they should be aware of unintended and unobserved effects of their method-based practice, for “where power dynamics are less visible, they are also likely to be more effective” (Roura, 2021, p. 3). Our framework can support such reflections based on a broad and systematic understanding of the power/method nexus. Even using a method that perfectly adheres to up-to-date technical and ethical guidelines is not free of power implications; methodologically and ethically guided research is still *powerful* research. Thus, also any ethically oriented research can benefit from our conceptualization as it allows us to expand and systematize the horizon of ethical orientation.

Our concept provides a systematic heuristic as to these often unrecognized and undesired ways power and methods can affect and intersect each other. This heuristic can guide researchers to identifying these ways in their specific research settings and developing possible strategies to address previously understudied implications of power relations. A particular practical benefit is that research projects employing social science methods have a systematic reminder at their disposal through which they can reflect on the possible immediate and far-reaching power effects of their research. Yet, as a *sensitizing tool*, it is not only capable of raising awareness of implications that may have not yet been reflected upon: Going beyond the logic of a static checklist, our framework needs to be practically fleshed out and brought to life by social scientists in specific contexts of method-based research, thereby facilitating an ongoing process of reflection that is, necessarily, never complete. Insofar as sociologists (and laypeople) from different methodological backgrounds utilize and contribute to this sensitizing tool, we see its particular value in its contribution to creating a space for collective reflexivity. Today, in times of increasing paradigmatic isolation, such a discursive space where social scientists can reflect on the conditions and consequences of method-based research is urgently needed for the discipline as a whole.

This very potential for multi-paradigmatic reflexivity, as attested and facilitated by our approach, distinguishes social scientific research from myopic uses of research methods. Such reflection is important, because it distinguishes the academic application of methods from fields that exhibit a less reflective stance with regard to how methods are enmeshed with power (perhaps most notably economic or political contract research). Yet, as we have argued, any research method is both shaped by and actively shapes the social, which renders the dimensions of the power/method nexus relevant beyond specific methodological approaches and the institutional contexts of academia (cp. Ruppert et al., 2013; Law et al., 2011).⁴ Our perspective allows social scientists to systematically reflect on how research techniques and power intersect outside the academic field. A particularly prominent candidate for applying our generalized framework is Big Data research. The diverse processes, techniques, and consequences associated with the phenomena subsumed under the broad label of Big Data have recently become objects of staunch criticism: for their practices of surveillance and evaluation; for how they govern, control, and sort people; for disproportionately representing and ‘visibilizing’ groups and whole populations; for (re-)producing social inequalities; and, ultimately, for contributing to a ‘neoliberal agenda’ (O’Neil, 2016; Neyland & Möllers, 2017; Beer, 2017). However, the generalized framework developed in our contribution attests to the fact that Big Data is not a genuinely new, dystopic apparatus but instead a particularly pronounced example of the interplay between methods and power. Conversely, we establish that more traditional methods, too, are permeated by the very fundamental mechanisms of power that are frequently considered to be unique characteristics of new digital technologies. Thus, whereas Big Data is commonly perceived as the ‘spawn of neoliberalism,’ it is worth noting that established methodologies such as SSR and QIR cannot be exonerated from having their own powerful effects on society. Nevertheless, in the spirit of our generalized conception, contemporary social science should not fatalistically dismiss the potential of these new data spheres for enlightenment and empowerment.

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Declarations

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⁴ The same applies to different national contexts. Whereas SSR and QIR have their intellectual roots in western traditions, we want to emphasize that the intersection between methods, on the one hand, and the societal conditions and consequences of their use, on the other, is not a unique feature of specific cultures but rather a social fact for all societies, whose particular configurations must be investigated by empirical research.

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