"Alles ist Blatt" – Goethean-driven Social Science and Qualitative Inquiry

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Summary

Means of diversifying methodological approaches include varying research questions and ways of asking them. This paper suggests that a diversity of qualitative approaches strengthens the research itself, and is of particular use in Goethean-driven social science. I use examples of my research in Andhra Pradesh, India, and Kwale county, Kenya, to question hypotheses- and measurement-driven pattern-seeking "scientific" models in favor of phenomenological participatory inquiry. In so doing, I discuss Goethean science and participatory research approaches to find common ground in perception-oriented and empathetic qualitative research methods.[1]

Zusammenfassung

Zu den Mitteln der Diversifizierung von methodischen Ansätzen gehören unterschiedliche Forschungsfragen und verschiedene Arten, sie zu stellen. In diesem Beitrag wird dargelegt, dass eine Vielfalt qualitativer Ansätze die Forschung selbst stärkt und in der goetheanistisch geprägten Sozialwissenschaft von besonderem Nutzen ist. Anhand von Beispielen aus meiner Forschung in Andhra Pradesh, Indien, und Kwale County, Kenia, stelle ich hypothesen- und messungsorientierte, nach Mustern suchende «wissenschaftliche» Modelle zugunsten einer phänomenologischen, partizipativen Untersuchung in Frage. Dabei diskutiere ich goetheanistische Wissenschaft und partizipative Forschungsansätze, um Gemeinsamkeiten in wahrnehmungsorientierten und empathischen qualitativen Forschungsmethoden zu finden.

Introduction

I open this paper with a discussion of applying ideas of Goethean science to social science research, i.e., in human-inclusive ecosystems,[2] using what is commonly known as participatory research approaches (*Berardi* 1998,

1 In this paper, I use "approach," "method," "framework," "study," and "thinking," interchangeably.

2 Referred to in this paper also as "social science systems," "human social science," and "human social systems."

2002; *Brown* 2022; *Park* 2006; and *Vaughn* & *Jacquez* 2020). I mention Goethe's methods specific to botanical and optical inquiry such as those utilized in the Goetheanum's Natural Sciences Section that conducts and guides contemporary Goethean science – approaches adding depth and richness to our understanding of natural phenomena. Yet as Goethe famously said "alles ist Blatt" (everything is leaf) (*Saman* 2020) – this begs the question, then, of whether or not we can apply Goethean approaches to social science systems as well.

In the literature, there are extensive discussions of Goethean approaches applied to human social systems, for example, Goethean cultural therapeutics (*Robbins* 2005), Goethean pedagogy (*Franses* & *Wride* 2015), or Goethean apprenticeship, which itself is based on a certain morality (*Bywater* 2005). Robbins has spoken about Goethean science as virtually identical to methods of contemporary empirical-phenomenological research in social sciences. The "empirical" label speaks to its emphasis on direct observation and collection (*Marr* 2003, *Dennis* 2020, *Wilson* 2024).

That Goethe is identified with phenomenology is no surprise. From Husserl's transcendental phenomenology to Heidegger's hermeneutics and Merleau Ponty's ideas of perception (*Alamyar* 2024, *Edwards* 2024), a strong case is made for sensation and perception as vehicles for collecting data, and sometimes the only vehicles for understanding the meaning of people's lived experiences. As I discuss here, in my immersive work in other cultures, such sensitivity is a precondition for working in human social systems.

Contemporary scientific inquiry today continues to be dominated by a mainstream positivistic approach in natural sciences. Positivistic science is characterized by a call for objectivity in the search for universal truths that are yet to be "found". The power of big numbers and large data sets allows for extrapolation to larger populations. Certainly, statistical methods for everything from sample selection to multivariate data analysis are part of a "gold standard" for such science.

The scientific method, however, is an approach for but one type of science. Other modes of inquiry include those of humanism, championed by geographer Yi Fu Tuan, which also looks very much like Goethean science (*Tuan* 1979, 1991, 2007, 2011). In the social sciences, the use of qualitative methods including ethnographies and similar techniques have been a mainstay, eventually giving rise to participatory research methods.[3]

3 Also giving rise to centers of participatory and collaborative research methods as can be found at the University of Edinburgh. See: https://binks-hub.ed.ac.uk/about/