

Qualitative Methods, Interdisciplinary Research, and the Sharing Economy

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1. Introduction

The words below, together, serve as the examination paper for the PhD course in Qualitative Methods in the Social Sciences at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lund University. As such, the purpose of this paper is to convey an understanding of the multitude of qualitative methods and their usefulness, or appropriateness, in executing the research programme for which I am admitted to PhD studies. Timely. Approximately six months into my PhD studies, an autopsy of my current research design and methodology is needed. As such, I have two additional purposes, personal in nature, that I wish to convey in writing this examination paper. Firstly, I use this paper as an opportunity to reframe my research strategy and methodology. Secondly, I bear the challenges, and opportunities, of applying qualitative methods in the social sciences to interdisciplinary research in sustainability.

In the following pages, I convey the way in which I have conceptualised and reconceptualised my research thus far. To begin, I introduce my PhD project and provide an overview of the research problem, the research objectives, and the ‘executable tasks’, as I like to call them. I present (and seek to justify) the mobile research lab methodology as an approach to study complex phenomenon in an urban context. Finally, synthesising the ‘executable tasks’ and the mobile research lab methodology, I present and discuss those qualitative methods envisaged for my research.

2. Context, Research Design and Scope of PhD Project

The idea of ‘sharing’ increasingly permeates public discourse, but takes on a broad definition. Depending on its context, today, sharing could mean to share: as an act of division into equal parts; as an act of distribution; as an act of communication; as a form of common ownership; or as a form of individual expression online (John, 2013). Although sharing has been a traditional form of exchange in human history (Belk, 2010), its interest to researchers has recently resurfaced as new business models are emerging, enabled by digital technologies and social media (Schor, 2006). Born from this idea, the ‘sharing economy’ has emerged as the catch-all term to capture divergent business models that leverage Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to connect people digitally (McLaren & Agyeman, 2015), enabling access to underutilised goods and services, skills and spaces (Frenken & Schor, 2017). The so-called sharing economy has been growing at unprecedented pace (Schor & Fitzmaurice, 2014) and is projected to reach €335 billion in global revenues by 2025 (Vaughan & Daverio, 2016).

In the last decade, there has been increasing focus on sharing as a means to address current unsustainable patterns of production and consumption by utilising the idling capacity of our material world (Voytenko Palgan, Zvolaska, & Mont, 2016). Proponents suggest that sharing may

improve resource efficiency, prevent idling of goods, and develop meaningful peer-to-peer interactions, enhancing trust within urban communities (McLaren & Agyeman, 2015; Voytenko Palgan et al., 2016). However, the sharing economy is not devoid of criticism; it has been called “neoliberalism on steroids”, as the sharing economy is both seen as a part of the capitalistic system and as an alternative to it (Richardson, 2015). The sharing economy, at the same time, promotes “more sustainable consumption and production practices” while reinforcing the “current unsustainable economic paradigm” (Martin, 2016). In so many words, I understand this paradox to mean that the sharing economy validates and encourages unsustainable consumer behaviour by framing consumption within the sharing economy as fundamentally more sustainable.

2.1. Research Design

With competing perspectives on the sharing economy, research is needed in order to help provide decision-support to entrepreneurs, policy makers, users/consumers, and academics. There is a need to investigate the practice of sharing, in particular, its application in an urban context, to determine its potential to positively impact sustainability in cities. Thus, any such research programme may seek to test this sustainability potential and theorise best practices in the design, implementation, and support of organisations engaging in sharing in cities. In particular, economies of scale and increasing urban challenges as a result of climate change, urbanisation, and population growth justify the focus of sharing in cities.

It is this research gap, or motivation, that the research programme *Urban Sharing: From Excess Economy to Access Economy* seeks to capitalise. The programme consists of three senior researchers, one postdoc, and two PhD students with the overarching research objectives of studying the design, practices, and processes of the sharing economy:

- DESIGN: To present best practices in which urban sharing organisations are designed, and how they operate and vary in a variety city contexts.
- PRACTICES: To study the sustainability impacts of urban sharing organisations and how they vary across cities.
- PROCESSES: To advance theoretical understanding of institutionalisation processes of urban sharing organisations across cities.

2.2. Data Collection

In order to adequately explore these objectives, research seeks to examine sharing organisations and city contexts in Berlin, London, Barcelona, Seoul, San Francisco, Sao Paulo, Jakarta and Melbourne using the mobile research lab methodology. This methodology sees researchers travelling to these cities for an intensive week comprised of collaborative processes of

conducting in-situ data collection and reflexive analysis, involving a number of people to take part in structured notetaking and reflection. This methodology was developed from past work by Harriet Bulkeley (Durham University) and Johannes Stripple (Lund University), originally called an InfraLab, which described a type of research activity which introduced an interdisciplinary group of researchers into an urban context to visit multiple sites in order to observe and interact with urban infrastructure and to interview relevant stakeholders. The methodological justification is built on interviews, focus groups, observation, and ethnographic methods. In doing so, researchers will interact with actors directly and indirectly involved in the sharing economy in cities (i.e. social and business entrepreneurs, users, city governments, incumbent companies, civil society organisations, NGOs).

2.3. Current Challenges

Early on, in line with the framing of the project, I conceptualised my research as investigating the sharing economy. As a researcher, it seemed natural to explore this concept as it dominates academic, innovation, and public discourse in describing a new way to allocate goods and services in a digital world. However, research within the sharing economy is challenging due to the “entanglement of culture and economy” (Richardson, 2015). Furthermore, the sharing economy as a concept is poorly defined, which hinders the ability to delineate or differentiate between the various business models and motivations of individual sharing organisations. Designing a research project requires a definition of the intended research phenomenon and a means to operationalise the definition to study the proposed phenomenon (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2010). Therein lies the problem. What is the sharing economy? Efforts have sought to define the sharing economy, but with little agreement and limited success in operationalising.

This difficulty is showcased in comparing sharing organisations such as Airbnb – a multinational corporation valued at over USD 31 billion, with more than 150 million total guests (Airbnb, n.d.; Thomas, 2017) – and Velogistics – a not-for-profit cargo-bike sharing platform operating in Berlin, Germany with 231 cargo-bikes (Velogistics, n.d.). Presumably, both organisations belong to the sharing economy; however, on the face, it seems as if there is more that is dissimilar than similar in the design and institutionalisation of these organisations.

Furthermore, there is a need to be critical in assessing and justifying research of the sharing economy as something fundamentally new as opposed to simply a “repackaging” of existing business models. For example, bike sharing has emerged as a tool for municipalities to offer alternative public transportation and reduce the number of cars in cities. Most commonly, bike sharing initiatives see centralised ownership (owned by the municipality or sub-contractor) with stationary distribution points throughout the city, which users pay to access for a specific time.

As the name suggests, and pervasive throughout academic and public discourse, bike sharing platforms are a part of the sharing economy. However, thinking critically, what distinguishes bike sharing from car rental services, which have been around since the 1910s (Automotive Fleet, 1962)? Both see centralised ownership, fee for access, and stationary points of distribution, but car rental companies like Avis or Hertz would never be considered a part of the sharing economy.

In reflecting on these challenges, two hypotheses emerge: 1) the fundamentally new thing about the sharing economy is the use of ICT in connecting strangers, which reduces transaction costs to share goods, services, time, or money; 2) the act of sharing, not the organisations themselves, provide rich opportunities for enhancing sustainability in cities, suggesting that the institutionalisation of sharing as a social norm requires further research. It is these two hypotheses that guide the following research strategy.

3. Research Strategy

The above (re)conceptualisation of the research programme, its objectives, its methodology, and the potential hypothesis allow me to construct a research strategy for my PhD studies. In doing so, I suggest the below “executable tasks” and the appropriate qualitative method(s), which, in my eyes, are required to execute in order to appropriately research sharing in cities. Each task corresponds to a proposed paper as a part of my dissertation, in which data collection is to be executed during specific mobile research labs (Table 1).

1. Sharing in a Modern Society

Grounded Theory | Qualitative Content Analysis | Discourse Analysis | Bibliometric Analysis

This paper will seek to analyse the academic discourse pertaining to the definition and dimensions of the sharing economy. A systematic literature review will be conducted, complemented by bibliometric analysis and qualitative content analysis. Using Scopus and Web of Science databases, we will collate those relevant articles, use bibliometric software to map the historical development of the field of research, and leverage qualitative content analysis with processes of conceptual coding and discourse analysis using NVivo. This work will seek to clarify the dimensions of the sharing economy, or sharing in society more broadly, to arrive at those dimensions which warrant further study in relation to sustainability and social cohesion in cities.

2. Stakeholder Mapping and Analysis

Interviews | Observations | Ethnography | Narrative & Discourse Analysis (?)

A systematic stakeholder analysis will be conducted to ensure the capture of relevant stakeholders in future investigation of sharing in our case cities. Using existing frameworks (Bocken, Short, Rana, & Evans, 2013) or existing methods for mapping stakeholders (Reed et al., 2009), I will perform stakeholder mapping and analysis. The stakeholder mapping and analysis

should seek to examine the relationship between stakeholders and their importance / relevance in supporting sharing in cities.

3. Analytical Framework for Investigating the Sharing Economy

Grounded Theory | Interviews | Observations | Ethnography

Interdisciplinary research with a focus on urban and sustainable contexts lack a clear framework for data collection and analysis. An analytical framework is needed to synthesis vast theoretical perspectives needed to study and explain sharing in cities. Preliminarily, it is envisaged that a set of factors (social, technical, economic, environmental, political, legal, ethical, demographic, etc.) will emerge both from the initial data along with consultation with relevant theoretical perspectives (business model design, sustainability evaluations, institutional theory). These factors – corresponding to explanatory variables pertaining to the design, practices and processes – will be further broken down into concepts and subconcepts, which operationalise the analytical framework in data collection during mobile research labs. The framework will be tested and revised iteratively during the mobile research labs before presenting a final analytical framework for the remainder of the case cities.

4. User Behaviour

Case Studies | Interviews | Observations | Ethnography | Focus Groups

The goal of this article will be to test the following hypothesis: **Users** of ICT-enabled sharing platforms behave differently and may adopt more sustainable consumption behaviour as opposed to **customers** associated with a traditional business model. In other words, I wish to test the idea that the transition from a ‘traditional’ business/customer relationship to users of a platform, which are allowed to contribute and engage with a community, enables the integration of group values and impacts user purchasing decisions elsewhere in their lives. This will require a particular focus on users during mobile research labs in case cities, including interviews, focus groups, and potentially large-scale survey of users.

5. Design – Facilitating Sharing by Reducing Transaction Costs

Interviews | Observations | Ethnography | Discourse & Narrative Analysis (?)

This paper will seek to test and elaborate on the first hypothesis: the advancement of ICT facilitated the reduction of transaction costs to share goods, services, time and money among strangers. I wish to provide evidence of an alternative hypothesis to the existing narrative on the development of the sharing economy, that the sharing economy emerged as a result of 2008 financial crisis (at least, for the reasons reported in literature) and as a response to the shift in consumer demands of ownership versus access to goods and services. In particular, I wish to establish evidence for these claims OR demonstrate that the sharing economy emerged as a result of enhanced ICT, which lead to the design of business models labelled as sharing.

6. Institutionalisation – Sharing as a Social Norm

Interviews | Observations | Ethnography | Focus Groups | Discourse Analysis

Instead of looking at the sharing economy as a sum of its organisations, I endeavour to explore the emergence of sharing as a social norm, facilitated by the sharing economy, and the implications of the institutionalisation of sharing in society as a means for distributing goods and services more sustainably. More reflection and consultation with literature is needed to establish any specific idea on how to accomplish this feat.

Table 1. *Timetable for Data Collection in Relation to Executable Tasks*

	Berlin (April 2017)	London (Nov 2017)	Barcelona (Feb 2018)	Seoul (June 2018)	San Fran (Nov 2018)	Sao Paulo (Jan 2019)	Jakarta (April 2019)	Melbourne (June 2019)
1. Definition								
2. Stakeholder		X	X	X				
3. Framework	X	X	X					
4. User Behaviour		X			X			X
5. Design		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
6. Institutionalisation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

4. Elaboration on Qualitative Methods

At this point, I wish to elaborate on the appropriate qualitative methods as indicated above. For my sake, I have distinguished the qualitative methods presented in this course as an approach, encompassing both data collection and analysis methods (grounded theory, case study research); as data collection methods (ethnography, observations, interviews, and focus groups); and as data analysis methods (narrative analysis, discourse analysis).

4.1. As an Approach

In adopting grounded theory and/or case study research, either dictate research design, data collection, and data analysis decisions (Bryman, 2012: 68, 70; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In comparing and contrasting grounded theory and case study research¹, similarities emerge, namely, the type of data collected, the use of field notes and memos, theoretical sampling, and the use of coding, among others.

¹ I found the reading for the course on case study research - *Five Misunderstandings about Case-Study Research* by Flyvbjerg (2006) – to be wholly inadequate and frustrating. For example, of which there are many, the author lacks credibility and delegitimises his argument when leaning on philosophical fallacies (appeal to authority, appeal to accomplishment) in saying “I figure if it is good enough for Harvard, it is good enough for me...” in justifying use of case study methodology. Moreover, I found the discussion regarding falsification and scientific paradigms lacking the nuance required in interpreting Popper and Kuhn. As such, I prefer Yin (2014) and Stake (1995) in understanding case study research.

Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss developed grounded theory, publishing the book *Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967. Stressing the importance of building theory from concepts discovered and developed from real-world data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), this qualitative research method is differentiated by concurrent data collection and analysis, where data analysis is used to inform subsequent data collection (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Case study research seeks to examine a 'case', often a person, community, or programme, to understand the complexity and particularity within a given location, context, or circumstance (Bryman, 2012: 66; Stake, 1995: xi). Moreover, case study research is salient, in particular, when there is an unclear delineation between the phenomenon under study and its context (Yin, 2014). Therefore, the complex nature of sharing in cities, which is inextricably linked to cultural and urban contexts, is, potentially, best explored through case study research. Important to case study research is the definition of the unit of analysis (Bryman, 2012: 68; Yin, 2014). The unit of analysis forms the 'case' in which one is interested to explore in more depth. Over the last six months, ongoing discussions have both the city and the urban sharing organisations as units of analysis, depending on the particular research question and research objective addressed.

The types of data collected can be similar between the approaches of grounded theory and case study research. Grounded theory sees data most frequently collected via interviews and observations, but may include any type of written, observed or recorded materials including videos, journals, blogs, drawings, memos, historical records, and Internet content (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Similarly, Stake (1995: 49-69) outlines the types of data and the data collection methods used in case study research highlighting interviews, observations and document reviews. In reflecting on the above executable tasks, I reckon that all of these data sources will be useful in data collection and analysis.

Memo writing, field notes, and the description of contexts are important in both grounded theory and case study research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). While this practice is often employed by researchers, in the case of grounded theory and case study research, these notes form a part of the analysis. For example, grounded theory uses analytical strategies such as questioning, making comparisons, considering various meanings, flip-flopping contexts, examining language and emotions, among others (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). These dialectical processes between the researcher and the data are of great importance; therefore, researchers preserve their thinking and work using memos and diagrams (Corbin & Strauss, 2015: 127).

Depending on the ways in which case study research chooses its sample, it can be seen as theoretical sampling as described in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006: 102; Cutcliffe, 2000: 1477). Theoretical sampling, in contrast to purposeful sampling, is an important characteristic of

grounded theory: a data sampling method driven by concepts and emerging theory, iteratively, as the data is collected and analysed (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Cutcliffe, 2000: 1477). Flyvbjerg (2006: 230) outlines strategies for selection of cases; however, although similar, I prefer the strategies outlined by Bryman (2012) and Yin (2014): the critical case; the extreme or unique case; the representative or typical case; the revelatory case; and the longitudinal case. The units of analysis, cities and urban sharing organisations, are selected as cases in the proposed research. The intention in selecting the eight cities is to capture the representative or typical case, in that these cities do in some form see sharing taking place, albeit in vastly different cultural and economic contexts. This cannot be seen as theoretical sampling, as these cases were predetermined prior to sampling. However, our approach in selecting those sharing organisations to investigate, which also will serve as cases, does occur as a result of subsequent data collection in the previous cities as we begin to develop concepts and hypothesis that dictate the sharing organisations in which we study.

Coding as a data analysis method is used in both grounded theory and case study research. In case study research, the search for meaning within the data either occurs in searching for a pattern directly within the data or via processes of coding, or both (Stake, 1995: 78). When patterns emerge with sufficient consistency, this is called correspondence (Stake, 1995: 78). While patterns may emerge from the data, similar to grounded theory, case study research differs in that it allows the researcher to approach the data with predetermined categories or concepts in the coding process (Stake, 1995: 29, 78). In contrast, grounded theory tends to be much more rigid in defining the processes of coding. For a more thorough discussion on the different approaches to coding relative to the ‘school’ of grounded theory, I recommend *Contrasting classic, Straussian, and constructivist grounded theory: Methodological and philosophical conflicts* by Kenny & Fourie (2015). I tend to adopt Straussian Grounded Theory, which diverges from the Classical Grounded Theory approach developed by Glaser & Strauss (1967) in that Straussian seeks to *create* concepts rather than *discover* them from the data. In so many ways, this embraces the post-positivist ontology that reality is constructed. However, I refrain from wholly embracing Constructivist Grounded Theory due to, what I perceive to be, more elaborate, meticulous and iterative processes of Straussian Grounded Theory (Kenny & Fourie, 2015). In particular, Corbin & Strauss (2015) describe coding in Straussian Grounded Theory as processes of open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and the use of the conditional matrix.

4.2. As Data Collection Methods

As the primary data collection method for the research project *Urban Sharing*, the mobile research lab (Section 2.2) seek to provide structure and support to researchers in order to

conduct intensive data collection in a short period of time. Each of our mobile research labs will last five to seven days, dictating the types of data and data collection methods available to us. It is this data and data collection methods that allow us to theorise about the sharing economy through qualitative data analysis, namely, ethnography, observation, interviews, and focus groups.

Ethnography and Observation

In describing the mobile research lab methodology to my colleagues and peers, I often framed the excursion as rapid and intense ethnographic field work. The intention of the mobile research lab is to observe, interact and interview stakeholders in the sharing economy by embedding, albeit temporarily, in the city context. However, I am quite sure that I will not be executing ethnography in the traditional sense. Due to the intensity and the short duration of our embedded nature, many of the activities and observations result from our presence and the necessity to provoke study of the given context. In particular, Fine (1993: 281) warns of becoming a “participant observer”, taking charge and influencing events in a desirable direction, suggesting transition from ethnographic research towards a field experiment.

However, there are elements of ethnographic research that I think are useful in conducting interdisciplinary research. For example, the use of observation in studying a community of research interest. There are times when observational data is more reliable than interview data, in particular, when the object of the study is information-seeking behavior (Talja, 1999: 471). Information-seeking behaviour is of particular relevance in understanding how and why users interact with sharing platforms (executable tasks #4 and #6).

Of course, as with any methodology, there is a need to be reflexive in understanding the limitations, or the motivations, of ethnography. This seems to be adequately summarised by Fine (1993) in highlighting the challenges of ethnography. Described as classic virtues, I am particularly vulnerable to the challenges of ethnography as described as the kindly ethnographer, the friendly ethnographer, and the honest ethnographer (Fine, 1993: 270-277). What may be a result of my North American upbringing, or massive insecurities, I find that I am often too agreeable and potentially disingenuous among research participants, which may misrepresent my intentions in conducting research. At least, by acknowledging this, I can be aware of its potential implications and, better yet, take the steps to prevent it from happening.

Of further interest, institutional ethnography, as described in DeVault (2012), requires further exploration in relation to studying sharing as an institution or social norm in society (executable task #6). This methodology refers to the “investigation of the empirical linkages among local settings of everyday life, organizations, and translocal processes of administration and governance” (DeVault, 2012: 2). In particular, institutional ethnographers do not study

institutions as discrete entities, instead examining the coordinated activities and relationships among the people involved (DeVault, 2012: 4). In examining the normalisation or institutionalisation of sharing as an activity in society, this approach may be useful; although, as done often in institutional ethnography, the interview is organised around the idea of work processes, organisations, and interchanges (DeVault, 2012: 8-13). This may need to be reconstituted as sharing as an institution is decentralised and may lack clear organisational structures.

Interviews

Interviews will form an important basis for which to collect data during the mobile research labs. Interviews provide already interpreted, secondary data (Talja, 1999: 471-472), but, for the purpose of this study, they will be seen as largely accurate portrayals of a “probabilistically apprehendable” reality as understood by the respondents (in line with critical realism presented by Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, interviews as a solely information-gathering exercise has its limitations; it relies on the respondents’ ability to accurately remember past situations and events and may be influenced by the research context, surroundings, and the interviewer (Talja, 1999: 471-472). Most commonly, interviews are seen as unstructured, semi-structured, and structured. Unstructured interviews provide the interviewee the most leeway in determining the structure and content of the interview, often performed as a conversation around broad themes where the interviewer is exploring a topic of which the interviewee possess more knowledge or regarding sensitive subject areas (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2013: 52-53). Semi-structured interviews, the favourite within my department, sees the interviewer working from a guide, which outlines the themes and potential questions, but is open to deviation when interesting lines of questioning arise (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2013: 53). Structured interviews follow a strict interview guide dictating the questions and order of the questions asked, typically consisting of close-ended questions (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2013: 53-54). I think, more and more, personal accounts of events are being collected via primarily structured interviews conducted on the Internet. Computer-mediated communication (CMC), via email, message boards, and video-messaging platforms, offer a new range of opportunities to social researchers to interview individuals previously inaccessible (Bryman, 2012: 666-667; Roulston, 2013: 309). However, there are research implications that must be considered in choosing to move the interview online, as outlined by Bryman (2012: 667).

I find that the way the interview is conducted is dependent on its purpose in answering the research questions and, quite possibly, on the ontological position of the researcher. Jacobsson & Åkerström (2013) contrasts the semi-structured and the social constructionist’s approaches to

interviews. The semi-structured interview suggests interviewers to use neutral, non-leading questions and warns against imposing the researcher's way of thinking on the interviewee (Jacobsson & Åkerström, 2013: 717). In contrast, the social constructionist approach sees the interview as a conversation in which the interviewer and interviewee are mutually co-constructing meaning (Jacobsson & Åkerström, 2013: 718). In particular, the interviewer's participation is incorporated in the data analysis (Jacobsson & Åkerström, 2013: 718). This approach to interviewing is often called the *active interview* (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2013: 55), said to "activate narrative production" where the interviewer intentionally suggests and even provokes narrative positions (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995: 39). While I acknowledge that levity and the ease in which conversation takes place is of importance in the interview setting, the interview as a narrative is of less importance in addressing my research objectives. I think most relevant to my research are the three phases of interviews and the subsequent activities, as suggested by Justesen & Mik-Meyer (2013: 57).

Focus Groups

Although not a major source of data collection, it is envisaged that focus groups will be used in understanding user behaviour and the institutional processes of sharing as a social norm (executable tasks # 4 and #6). Focus groups are often placed between ethnographic observation and interviews on the spectrum of qualitative methods as, traditionally, analysis considers what was said, but also the context and the way in which it was said (Myers, 1998: 87, 106). As a method, focus groups see a trained moderator facilitate a carefully designed conversation in order to obtain participants' perceptions regarding an area of research interest (Myers, 1998: 85). In my preliminary research, a common societal narrative emerged regarding the sharing economy and its positive sustainability impacts. As such, as moderator, I shall take due care in probing participants to think reflectively about their involvement in the sharing economy, being critical of the entrenched narrative. According to Myers (1998, 91), the moderator may steer conversation, cut off, or close a topic, often while working with the dynamics of the conversation. Furthermore, Myers (1998, 89) states that focus groups tend to be made up of homogeneous participant groups. With regard to the sharing economy, users are a heterogeneous community with differing motivations, which are difficult to assess ahead of time. On one hand, I think that a heterogeneous sample may spur more discussion; however, Myer (1998, 89) has found that "participants in groups that are too heterogeneous tend to stick to superficial statements". To deal with this, Roulston (2013: 307) suggests conducting pilot interviews or focus groups as a way to deal with methodological issues and assess the potential of the data to respond to the research questions.

In analysing focus group data, Barbour (2013: 314) is critical of using individual quotes in making an argument; instead, she argues for longer exchanges between participants, which reveal the context in which the quote was made. She makes the case for a composite approach to analysing focus group data, which include conversational analysis, discourse psychology, and positioning theory (Barbour, 2013: 320). While I recognise the importance of context, I do not think it is feasible to use these approaches to analysing my potential focus group data in addition to the other tools and fields of study I must master in order to understand the material. However, Barbour (2013: 324) acknowledges the new developments in focus group analysis due to advancements in the Internet and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS). This software can also be useful in coding during grounded theory or case study research, as well as in discourse and narrative analysis.

4.3. As Data Analysis Methods

At first, I was reluctant to consider discourse and narrative analysis as qualitative methods to devote much time or attention to. In part, I think that these methods better serve researchers and research questions from purely social science disciplines compared to inter- and transdisciplinary research (see Section 6. Reflections). Nonetheless, I have evolved my thinking in seeing a role for this type of analysis in relation to my research; however, I think that the nuances and tediousness of this type of analysis is, at times, superfluous in relation to my research objectives. As such, I only wish to briefly elaborate on the specifics of how I see discourse and narrative analysis in my research.

Throughout my research strategy, I see elements of discourse analysis needed to address specific executable tasks (#1, #2, #5 and #6). As a method borne out of the linguistic turn in the social sciences, discourse analysis has a particular focus on “language in the construction of social reality” (Talja, 1999: 460). However, as it has evolved, discourse analysis now describes a diverse set of approaches, which may not have common theoretical roots (Talja, 1999: 460). As I see it, the role of language in constructing notions of the sharing economy, and the processes that lead to its construction, are less interesting to me as opposed to what was said, who said it, and whether what was said is “probabilistically true”. Therefore, I reference Figure 6.2 in Fairclough (2001: 146), which highlights the situational context of discourse and the relevant discourse type. For my research, I find that I am more interested in the situational contexts “what is going on? (activity, topic, purpose)”, “who’s involved?”, and “in what relations?” and the corresponding discourse types contents, subjects, relations, respectively (Fairclough, 2001: 146-148). I am less inclined to study “what’s the role of language in what’s going on?” as the situational context and corresponding discourse of connections (Fairclough, 2001: 148-149). Interview data will serve as

a primary source of data for discourse analysis. However, I do not hold the same view as Hammersley (2014: 538) with regard to interview data, where he suggests interviews for discourse analysis are not designed as information gathering of general attitudes, instead with a focus on the discursive practices respondents employ. As stated, I am less interested in the role of language and power and more on the information and attitudes of interviewees engaged in the sharing economy.

Talja (1999: 474) states that among the aims of discourse analysis is “to point out the power and influence of particular narratives” and study their functions and effects. However, when approaching the book chapter of Andrews, Sclater, Squire, & Tamboukou (2011) called *Narrative Analysis*, I did not find a satisfying description regarding the methods of narrative analysis. Instead, the authors, as co-directors of the Centre for Narrative Research, thought that a discussion regarding “a robust shared definition of ‘narrative’ would divert [the discussion] from what was most interesting about the work itself” (Andrews et al., 2011: 2). Instead, the authors thought it best to organise the chapter around their own experiences in working with narrative research, I presume, as it is easier to write a book chapter in which each co-author only needs to contribute a section of the chapter instead of collaboratively seeking to advance the methodological discussion forward. Each author engages in a separate discussion surrounding counter-narratives, narrative genres, autobiographical narratives, and subjectivity in narrative research (Andrews et al., 2011). More useful in understanding narrative analysis, Esin, Fathi, & Squire (2013: 2) indicate that narrative analysis is a flexible approach, exploring how people “story their lives”. Narrative analysis seeks to understand the diversity of the stories, treating the stories as layered and complex instead of a coherent and unified entity (Esin et al., 2013: 2). Of most use, the consideration of performativity, the role of the audience, and power relations (Esin et al., 2013: 4, 6) may serve useful in my analysis, although, only time will tell.

In studying sharing, it may be interesting: to understand how the contents, subjects and relations of the discourse have changed overtime (#1); to explore the overriding narratives within and among stakeholder groups (#2); to investigate the way in which overriding narratives permeate and influence the discourse surrounding the design of sharing organisations (#5); and, to study the institutionalisation of sharing as a social norm within a broader societal discourse on consumption (#6). Of course, in doing so, language, power, and subsequent power relations may play a role; therefore, I understand the need to acknowledge and be aware of the role of language and power among respondents but this is not the primary interest to me as a researcher.

5. Reflections

In writing this examination paper, I could not help but reflect on the appropriateness of these qualitative methods in interdisciplinary research. I wish to expose my reality of interdisciplinary² or transdisciplinary³ research: 1) from my point of view, interdisciplinary research seeks to answer fundamentally different research questions compared to disciplines in the social sciences; 2) as such, some of the qualitative methods, as developed and used in disciplines within the social sciences, are less applicable or appropriate in interdisciplinary / transdisciplinary research.

Firstly, I believe the questions asked by researchers in the social sciences differ from those asked by interdisciplinary researchers in sustainability sciences. “‘Sustainability’ is multiple things at once and navigates interesting territory—it is a goal, an ideal, an umbrella, and a sub-discipline of multiple disciplines” (Stock & Burton, 2011: 1091). As such, increasingly, I question the applicability of qualitative methods in interdisciplinary research, or at least in the same way as they are intended in the fields of sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc. Potentially, one reason for this is the ontological and epistemological positions of the researcher from these disciplines. These positions have some bearing on the methodological choices and vice versa. For example, constructionism is widely adopted by narrative researchers (Esin, Fathi, & Squire, 2013: 203); discourse analysis reflects the constructivist ontology in interpreting, negotiating and constituting reality (Potter, 1996: 98; Talja, 1999: 461); constructivist grounded theory “encourages you to theorize in the interpretive tradition ... devl[ing] into implicit meanings and processes” (Charmaz, 2006: 146). As such, fields like sociology, psychology and anthropology have seen an “ontological turn” in recent decades towards that of constructionism/constructivism⁴ (see Gergen, 1985; Holbraad, Pedersen, & Castro, 2014). According to Guba & Lincoln (1994: 109), constructivism adopts a relativist ontology in that local and constructed realities exist, drawing from subjective and created knowledge. Constructivists, in addition to studying a phenomenon, tend to also be interested in *how* and *why* questions that seek to understand the way in which participants understand, construct, and interpret the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006: 130; Potter, 1996: 98).

² Interdisciplinary research sees teams from differing disciplines working collaboratively, yet still from their respective discipline (Aboelela et al., 2007).

³ Transdisciplinary research sees teams from differing disciplines working collaboratively, using jointly discipline-specific theories, conceptual frameworks, concepts, and methodologies (Aboelela et al., 2007).

⁴ I have worked very hard to understand the nuanced differences between constructionism and constructivism. It seems to me that literature for the course and, as a result, myself use these terms interchangeably. However, I have understood constructivism to describe a reality that is constructed individually through **cognitive processes**. Similarly, (social) constructionism is a **social process** in which reality is constructed through discourse and conversation via language.

In contrast, I suggest that interdisciplinary research, especially in the field of sustainability, may adopt differing ontological and epistemological positions, reflected in the research questions and the application of qualitative methods. Inter- and trans-disciplinary research in sustainability sciences is often characterised by addressing “specific real world problems”, usually with the intention of providing decision-making support to key stakeholders (i.e. policy-makers, industry, citizens) (Stock & Burton, 2011). As such, researchers in sustainability sciences often adopt a critical realist ontology, such as myself. This ontological perspective supports the notion of one “real” reality that is only probabilistically apprehendable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The very motivation for sustainability research is antithetical to the constructivist ontology. A relativist outlook on reality in relation to sustainability science contradicts the impetus for such research, especially when research outcomes are used as decision support. This is not to suggest that sustainability researchers should avoid reflexivity and discount the limitations of their methodologies. Instead, researchers must acknowledge and be forthcoming in that the knowledge generated is probably true to the best of their ability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, I suggest that the ontological and epistemological positions of researchers in the social sciences and interdisciplinary sciences impact the framing of research questions and the execution of chosen qualitative methods.

In illuminating this, Jonathan Potter, in *Representing Reality*, raises the metaphor of the mirror and the construction yard. The mirror reflects, through language, a reality that is “reliable, factual or literal”, with a focus on the description of a phenomenon (Potter, 1996: 97). In contrast, the metaphor of the construction yard recognises that descriptions construct versions of reality and that these descriptions themselves are constructed (Potter, 1996: 97). While I recognise the merit in approaching the research arena as a construction yard, the processes that lead to the construction of reality seem less relevant for the audience of my research; instead, I seek to develop elaborate explanatory descriptions of real-world phenomenon with less emphasis on the dialectical processes of construction. In collaborating with diverse societal stakeholders, as one often does in inter- and trans-disciplinary research, I think that a “probabilistically apprehendable” reality is more palatable than a relativist ontology.

Unfortunately, there seems to be little acknowledgement of the potential differences in application of qualitative methods in interdisciplinary research. In fact, in the 1,400+ pages of reading for the course, to my knowledge, the word interdisciplinary is found less than ten times, of which, the context is largely unhelpful for interdisciplinary researchers. For example, it is said that narrative analysis can be a useful corrective tool in interdisciplinary research to counter the reductive tendencies of individual disciplines (Andrews, Scater, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2011: 6).

Barbour (2013: 6) suggests that it is “possible to present findings in a variety of formats for different audiences ... enhanced by the broader scope afforded by interdisciplinary research teams”. Esin et al. (2013: 3) describes the “interdisciplinary space” as researchers from sociology, psychology, history and anthropology, which may use narrative analysis. This rather narrow view of interdisciplinary research, in my opinion, is also iterated by Potter (1996: 17) in describing “the wide interdisciplinary collaboration among sociologists, philosophers and historians of science, psychologists, linguists and literary analysts.”

I found the readings on discourse analysis and narrative analysis to be the most obtuse for me as an interdisciplinary researcher. Of interest to me, Cameron (2001: 47) admits the tendency of instructors and authors to represent the discernible disciplinary roots of discourse analysis. Her discussion then details the way in which discourse analysis is used, and has evolved from, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, and linguistics (Cameron, 2001: 47-49). Furthermore, I appreciate the discussion in Barbour (2013: 314) acknowledging the differences in the way that focus group researchers may analyse the data depending on their realist or constructivist ontologies. Moreover, I enjoyed the discussion in Justesen & Mik-Meyer (2013: 41-49) regarding quality criteria in research depending on the ontological position of the researcher, in particular, the effort by the realist to generalise research results and the importance of triangulation.

As a PhD student, I have much to learn. I acknowledge the journey before me and welcome the challenge and critique on my world view. Ironically, I recognise that my reality is constructed through my experiences just as you have constructed your reality. Of the many challenges, I wish to start and further the discussion of robust methodology in my department, and more broadly within interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research. However, it is a challenge enough to deal with the nebulous concept of the sharing economy; to work with a new and imperfect research methodology; and to bridge the numerous potentially relevant research fields of organisational management, innovation, sustainability evaluations, institutional theory, transition management theory, behavioural sciences, economics, governance, among others. Nonetheless, I think a discussion about qualitative methods and, more specifically, their application in interdisciplinary research is one to be had and I have appreciated this foray into such a discussion with relation to my research.

6. References

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