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Why counting counts

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Why Counting Counts

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J'Accuse...

The contemporary field of cultural studies has little interest in, or engagement with, quantitative analysis. If you don't believe me, here are some numbers.

As preparation for this chapter – which explores the reasons for this disengagement and its detrimental implications – I conducted a content analysis of 130 refereed articles published in six recent editions of three major cultural studies journals (*Cultural Studies*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* and *International Journal of Cultural Studies*¹). In this analysis, I counted all and any references made to either primary quantitative data (i.e. author-generated) or secondary quantitative data (i.e. statistics produced by other academic, official or corporate sources)².

The finding that thirty four percent of the articles contained some quantitative data may appear to weaken my initial assertion. However, this headline figure gives a misleading impression of the prominence of statistical evidence in the corpus of material analysed. Articles that presented quantitative data more frequently referred to other people's statistics rather than numbers the authors had collected themselves (29 percent of the articles presented secondary data, compared with 8 percent that presented primary data³). Furthermore, the presentation and discussion of quantitative evidence tended to be fleeting: in the 44 articles that contained any statistical data, the average amount of space dedicated to the presentation and discussion of the numbers accounted for less than 1

¹ *Cultural studies* Volume (editions): 19 (4 to 6), 20(1 to 2, 4); *European Journal of Cultural studies*, 8 (2 to 4), 9 (1 to 3); *International Journal of Cultural studies*, 8 (2 to 4), 9 (1 to 3).

² I did not code all numerical references (e.g. '9/11', 'The Top Ten' etc). To be included the numbers had to represent from some formal observation, collation and analysis.

³ These are not mutually exclusive categories, which is why their addition exceeds 34 percent.

percent of total article length (0.98 percent), which represents, on average, less than a fifth of a published page⁴.

Quantitative content analysis was the most frequently conducted form of original statistical analysis (five of the ten original data collection exercises identified). In terms of secondary data, survey data was presented most (32 of the 57 presentations identified), followed by generic economic data (22 appearances). The sources of these secondary data were, respectively, 'academic sources' (23 appearances), 'corporate sector sources' (16 appearances), 'national/ international official sources' (13 appearances), 'opinion polls' (3 appearances) and 'unclear' (2 appearances).

The numbers that were quoted were never challenged nor interrogated. Not a single methodological, epistemological or ontological question was raised about any of the statistical results presented. Furthermore, contextual information that is normally used to appraise the reliability and validity of quantitative data was almost always absent (e.g. sample size and procedures). In the 2,276 pages I scrutinized, I identified only one reference to a significance test.

Such uncritical invocation of statistics could be indicative of a naïve acceptance, even reification, of the objectivity and authority of quantitative evidence. I am convinced this is not the case. Rather, I believe it further supports my initial point about a general disengagement and indifference in cultural studies towards quantitative modes of analysis. Although there may be occasions when the incidental use of a cherry-picked statistic can serve a general analytical (or rhetorical) function; in the main, the real intellectual work of cultural studies - the locations where meaningful reflexivity and debate is to be had - is seen to involve engaging with theoretical complexities or revelling in the richness of qualitative data.

Such assumptions are so widely accepted in the field that they are rarely openly articulated, but there are occasions when they surface. Take, for example, Simon

⁴ It should also be appreciated that these averages were inflated by the presence of three articles that dedicated more than five pages each to the presentation and analysis of statistical evidence. If these 'outlying values' are excluded from the calculation, the average proportional presence of statistical data per-article drops to 0.75 percent.

During's observation about the rising influence of ethnography in cultural studies research:

‘It can be “quantitative”, which involves large-scale surveys and (usually) statistical analysis. However this kind of research ultimately belongs more to the social sciences than to cultural studies’ (2005: 23)

In challenging this kind of demarcation, this chapter explores three themes: the reasons why quantitative analysis is deemed *infra dig* for cultural studies; the relevance of this enduring disengagement; and its restrictive implications for the field as a whole. In addressing these issues, however, I am not advocating quantification as a preferable or more superior mode of analysis. Indeed, I am antagonistic to epistemic prioritization of this kind; just as I am to its mirror opposite, which vaunts qualitative analysis as the only legitimate mode of analysis (Deacon et al., 1998). As shall be explained, both perspectives are informed by a flawed and outmoded methodological determinism.

Reasons

To understand the reasons for cultural studies' disengagement with quantitative methods there is a need to appreciate the broad and specific historical contexts in which the field emerged and established its presence. In wider terms, the rise of cultural studies in the 1960s constituted just one condensation funnel in a multi-vortex tornado that transformed the human sciences. Across the disciplines, this period was marked by a resurgence in anti-positivism, in which earlier hermeneutic traditions were rediscovered, reasserted and extended (Morrison, 1998: chapter 4). In this new *zeitgeist*, positivist epistemology and methodology were not only identified as philosophically untenable but also as politically reactionary, complicit in the legitimization of capitalist exploitation, racism and sexism (for a recent statement of this position, see Steinmetz, 2005). Particularly influential in this respect were feminist critiques that identified andocentric traits in the development and application of statistical methods and, as a consequence, prescribed a methodological agenda orientated exclusively around qualitative methods (Cook and Fonow, 1986; Miles, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1983; Harding, 1987; Lather, 1988; Reinharz, 1992). Such critiques resonated powerfully with the political inclinations of cultural studies pioneers, and their affiliation to humanist Marxism, interest in identity

politics and support for subaltern groups (Inglis, 1993: 131). Thus, the field readily and willingly aligned itself with what van de Berg has disparagingly labelled as ‘the epistemological left’ (2005).

There are additional, specific reasons why an elective antipathy to quantitative methods became part of the rote and routine of cultural studies. All of the key founding figures had backgrounds in literary studies, rather than the social sciences, and their intellectual orientations and methodological predilections soon became formalised in the teaching and research activity of the field. In theoretical terms, this disciplinary infusion helped vitalise previously moribund debates about communication and media, providing new and exciting ways of conceptualising the ‘production, circulation, distribution/ consumption [and] reproduction’ of meaning (Hall 1973/ 1993: 91). Carey characterised this change as a shift from a ‘transmission’ to ‘ritual’ view of communication, which saw ‘the original or highest manifestation of communication not in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action’ (1985: 19).

Methodologically, however, this change provided an additional reason for rejecting quantitative methods, as their development and deployment had been a central feature of the dominant ‘transmission’ paradigm (Gitlin, 1978). For example, in a chapter outlining the conduct of Media Studies at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural studies in the late 1970s, Stuart Hall confidently asserted: ‘Audience-based survey research, based on the large statistical sample using fixed-choice questionnaires, has at last reached the terminal point it has long deserved – at least as a serious sociological enterprise’ (Hall, 1980: 120, quoted by Morrison, 1998)

In this new fixation with questions of representation and meaning, traditional quantitative methods were rejected as intractably inflexible and ill-conceived. Quantitative content analysis, with its emphasis on cross-textual denotative aggregation, was criticised for ignoring the imminent complexities of textual meaning and how it ‘derives from relationships, oppositions and context rather than the quantity of references’ (McQuail, 1987: 189). Experiments and sample-surveys were shunned for

their failure to engage people's with complex interior lives or their situated cultural and social experiences. As Inglis remarks:

'[O]ne is seeking out the presence and power of intersubjective meaning and value. These are not quantities in people's heads, retrievable by social surveyors. They are the evaluative atmosphere or ethos which the members of a society must breathe in and out by virtue of being human and sociable... Common or intersubjective meanings and values, therefore, are not... available to hard data and social-survey analysis' (1993: 148).

An important element of such critiques is the proposition that frequency of occurrence should not be seen as the definitive measure of significance or, indeed, signification (e.g. Burgelin, 1968). Although cultural studies defined itself, at least initially, as a political project asking major questions about capitalist hegemony (Hartley, 2003; Rojek, 2002), it sought to do so by interrogating the particularities of culture rather than its generalities. This orientation remains prevalent to this day. For example, in her recent book on cultural studies research methods, Ann Gray emphasizes the 'uniqueness' of textual and ethnographic investigations and their incompatibility with traditional social scientific concerns about 'generalizability' and 'representativeness' (Gray, 2002: 74, quoted in Barker, 2005). In a similar vein, John Hartley described his methodology for his study of journalism, modernity and popular culture:

'I tend to concentrate on what I take to be emblematic texts or moments, using these to tease out the implications and significations involved, rather than attempting objective methodologies like sampling, surveying or statistics. This is because I am interested in meanings, which are rarely expressed in the form of generalities. You can reduce a kiss to information for the benefit of scientific enquiry, of course, but it is not a method which yields complete understanding of what a given kiss means in specific circumstances to its participants and onlookers. So the methods employed in this book are documentary, historical, argumentative, metaphorical and textual' (1996: 6)

More recently, Hartley has also acknowledged the general indifference of cultural studies to questions of 'scale':

‘Thus, where sociology and anthropology were generalising, classifying and theorising disciplines, cultural studies retained some of its literary-critical mindset, with a devotion to detailed and passionate engagement with the particular. (2003: 124)

This emphasis upon particularities and emblems helps identify a further reason why the field has been so resistant to quantitative methods. Cultural studies is orientated to the deconstruction of meaning, whereas statistics are fundamentally about the construction of meaning. Numbers do not arrive unbidden, from thin air; they rely on defining and operationalizing concepts and categories, and choosing and applying procedures. This constructive process is often obscured in the presentation of the resulting data, which results in the simulation of ‘an objectivity that in reality depends on the legitimacy of the questions asked’ (Gadamer, 1975: 268). Both of these factors are guaranteed to invite the scepticism rather than the interest of cultural studies’ analysts, although it is significant to note that this rarely extends to a detailed deconstruction of actual statistical evidence. Most typically, it amounts to a high-handed dismissal of quantification *per se*, as inevitably lacking ecological validity.

A final point of relevance here is that the field’s resistance to quantitative analysis varies. Almost all of the statistics I identified in my content analysis of recent cultural studies journals were descriptive statistics, that is, the numbers were used to ‘describe’ wider social, economic and cultural trends. Their uncritical use suggests a degree of tolerance for this kind of empirical evidence, even if its contribution is marginalized and uninterrogated. Such acceptance does not extend, however, to statistical inference: the realm where statistics are used for hypothesis testing and extrapolating wider population estimates on the basis of what has been observed (Deacon et al, 2007, chapter 5). Certainly, this is the facet of statistics that has attracted most criticism from feminist theorists (e.g. Hughes, 1995). Two findings from the content analysis confirm this antipathy is shared in cultural studies: the almost complete lack of any reference to statistical significance tests, and the total absence of experimental research-based evidence. Tests for statistical significance make assumptions about the stability and predictability of social, cultural and psychological patterns (‘because we find it here, we can predict confidently its existence and extent elsewhere’). Experiments are methods

designed specifically to establish and measure causality. Both propositions are an anathema to a field that is shaped, at root, by ‘the literary affirmation of human singularity’ (Inglis, 1993: 131) and that valorises the capriciousness, creativity and particularity of human expression. ‘Textual poachers’ are not amenable fodder for regression analysis.

Relevance

Having identified the main reasons for cultural studies’ resistance to quantitative modes of analysis, I now want to consider the relevance of this situation. This may seem a strange question to pose, as the criticisms outlined in the previous section would seem to be immutable. However, although a dismissal of quantification remains largely unchallenged in the cultural studies mainstream, elsewhere in the human sciences such assumptions have been subjected to considerable revision, particularly regarding the extent to which one can ‘read-off’ epistemologies and politics, on the basis of methodological choice.

Reading off epistemology

At the core of the hermeneutic turn in the 1960s and 1970s was an ‘incompatibility thesis’ (Howe, 1988: 10). This held that methodology and epistemology existed in an iron embrace, and as a consequence qualitative and quantitative methods could never be combined satisfactorily (e.g. Guba and Lincoln, 1982; Smith, 1983). More recently, however, interest has grown across many disciplines in the combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, which suggests opinions have altered on the ‘epistemology/ methodology’ link. The sociologist Alan Bryman has been at the foreground of debates about the reconcilability of qualitative-quantitative methods for many years (e.g. Bryman, 1988) and in a recent study examined (a) the prevalence of multi-method studies in refereed journals across the human sciences and (b) the views of senior academics on the pitfalls and benefits of combining qualitative and quantitative methods (Bryman, 2006). On the basis of this investigation, he concluded that, although pockets of resistance remain:

‘[T]he paradigm wars [of previous decades] have been replaced by a period of paradigm peace. In this new era, there is a tendency to stress the compatibility

between quantitative and qualitative research and a pragmatic viewpoint which prioritizes using any approach that allows research questions to be answered regardless of its philosophical presuppositions' (2006: 124).

This shift in emphasis from 'means' to 'ends' is the product of several related developments. First, it can be seen as a measure of the success of the hermeneutic critique of positivism in the 1960s and 1970s. Without question, it was a vital intervention and few, if anyone, would now subscribe to beliefs about the objectivity and value freedom of statistical evidence; nor fail to appreciate the limitations of quantitative methods. However, once purged of their epistemological pretensions, quantitative methods become amenable for inclusion in more reflexive and interpretative research activity. Second, this interest in incorporating quantitative methods in multi-method investigations also reflects a growing appreciation of the limitations of interpretivism, in particular, concerns about the research issues it closes off, the methodological inhibitions it can create, and the spectres of solipsism and relativism that haunt the paradigm. Third, it has been argued that the incompatibility thesis overstates the antinomy of positivist-orientated and interpretivist-orientated research concerns. For example, Murdock notes that many qualitative and ethnographic studies within cultural studies, despite their resistance to more formal forms of statistical measurement, 'often fall back on loose statements of how many people did or said something or how often' (1997: 181) (see also Lewis, 1997). The legitimacy of this observation was confirmed by my own experiences in conducting the content analysis of recent cultural studies journals. Time and again, I encountered quasi-quantitative statements in the articles, not only in the presentation of qualitative empirical evidence, but also in authors' general rhetorical and theoretical discourse. A small selection from the plethora of comments I encountered are set out in box 1, for illustrative purposes. My point in presenting them is not to suggest that they all needed more specific and rigorous quantification, but rather to demonstrate a prevalent, if tacit, acceptance that in political, analytical and rhetorical terms, 'frequency of occurrence' does count – even when it is not counted.

Box 1: Quasi-quantification and cultural studies: some recent examples

(n.b. emphasis added in all cases)

'In *almost every instance*, [the programme's] wrongdoers fit this description'

'*The majority* of quiz shows to emerge in recent years depend on "general/ academic" knowledge'

'The Italian audience has been offered *an increasing number* of home-grown serials'

'*Most of the interviewed club culture practitioners...* seemed acutely aware of these more general and, in particular, local contexts and instances of racialised power differentials in the City's club culture economy'

'In recent times we have witnessed *a growing attention* to global flows of information and telematics and their post colonial implications'

'I was struck by the fact that *almost all* the interviewees spontaneously referred to [the programme]'

'Technologically mediated communication *is frequently* only a supplementary mode of exchange supporting geographically dispersed family members'

'There is certainly *a well-established association* between middle-class gay men and the gentrification of inner city housing stock'

'The study of media pleasure *was once widespread* in media studies'

'Not surprisingly, *many of the interviewees* saw economic globalization as an exploitative process'

'*Some of our interviewees* seemed to prefer not to get too immersed'

'[the central character] *was described almost unanimously* as the embodiment of the new social group (or class) of career woman'

Despite the general growth of interest in multi-method research in the human sciences - and indeed its popularity within related branches of communication and media studies – cultural studies remains strangely impervious to its appeal. This is a surprisingly outmoded stance for a field that has long vaunted its cutting edge inter-disciplinarity and reflexivity. As Justin Lewis comments:

‘Research within cultural studies has consistently been qualitative rather than quantitative... While such a preference was initially both well-conceived and fruitful, the lingering suspicion of numerical data has degenerated into habit. It is as if the argument with these methodologies was so comprehensively settled that one can be spared the time and effort of any further thought on the subject’
(1997: 84)

In criticising this ‘doctrinal’ rejection of quantification, Lewis also questions whether quantitative audience research should be as readily dismissed for its theoretical inadequacies. For example, he argues that agenda setting research provides a ‘germ of an analytical model’ (1997: 93) with its interest in reality construction and analytical distinction between ‘deep ideological structures – the social encyclopaedia of common knowledge – and the more overtly ideological discourse of attitudes and opinions’ (1997:). Similarly, he applauds the cultivation analysis research of George Gerbner and colleagues, which ‘for all its shortcomings... remains the only comprehensive body of research to have systematically demonstrated that television plays a clearly defined hegemonic role in contemporary culture’ (1997: 89). Furthermore, Lewis sees no reason why other public opinion data cannot be appropriated and integrated within ‘a thorough going analysis of the evolving ideological character of cultural industries and institutions,’ and be used ‘to provide the rough contours of a complex ideological map’ (1997: 89).

Reading off Politics

Just as views about the intrinsic epistemological flaws of quantification are being challenged, so questions are being raised about the accusations that statistics are always the refuge of reactionaries.

As noted, feminist critics have been very influential in this political assault on quantification (e.g. Belenky *et al.*, 1986; Reinhartz, 1984; Harding, 1987; Gilligan, 1982). For example, Hughes (1995) argues that ‘The politics of domination are integrated into the scientific method and used as a political agent for those in power’ (p.395). She supports this appraisal by providing fascinating historical details about the early inventors of statistics and their broader intellectual and political concerns:

‘Statistical methods were invented as a way of knowing by men motivated by eugenic politics... While enabling investigation in every field of study, statistical analysis has also aided in the social construction of dominance by giving scientific authority to the construction of reified categories which lead to the objectification of oppressed, subjugated groups’ (1995: 401).

These are grave accusations. However, I have two reservations about her critique. First, although there have been many occasions when the analysis of ‘statistical difference’ has been used to objectify and stigmatise marginalised groups, it does not follow that this is invariably the case. Indeed, it has been argued by other critical scholars that the identification of difference is a vital component for democratic progress (see, in particular, Nancy Fraser’s work on the politics of recognition [1995]). On a more applied level, it is widely recognised within the public policy literature that the identification, naming and categorisation of marginalised social groups is an essential precondition for them to receive appropriate support, resources and respect. Second, Hughes provides many examples where statistics were developed for patriarchal and racist purposes, but fails to demonstrate precisely what it is within the statistical procedures themselves that are inherently inscribed by prejudicial values. Furthermore, couched within her critique is a major concession:

‘This does not make the mathematics incorrect, or nullify knowledge that has been gained by the use of statistical analysis’ (1995: 396)

Her attack, in other words, is focused on the political (mis)uses of these procedures and delusions of their creators, rather than their intrinsic deficiencies. Quantification is thus declared guilty by association, which is rather like condemning the development of the internal combustion engine because of its use in machineries of war; neglecting its equally vital role in improving the efficacy of ambulance services.

This may seem a trite analogy, but the essential point would be supported by those who question the historical veracity of the claim that statistics have always privileged patriarchy. Ann Oakley (1998) warns against the ‘dangers of simple histories’, and argues that it is not ‘clearly the case that “quantitative” methods have served no relevant feminist goal’ (1998: 721-22). Against Hughes’ invocation of eugenicists such as Francis Galton, Karl Pearson and Ronald Fisher, Oakley cites a long list of feminist reformers like Jane Adams, Harriet Martineau, Florence Nightingale and Beatrice Webb who all conducted sample survey research to generate ‘policy-relevant knowledge as ammunition for social reform’ (1998 : 722). A particularly valuable aspect of Oakley’s critique is how it highlights that what is sometimes referred to in an undifferentiated way as a ‘feminist’ methodological critique, is actually based on a specific form of feminism: the ‘difference’ feminism of theorists such as Carol Gilligan, which subscribes to the existence of fundamental psycho-biological differences between women and men. This second wave feminism has been subjected to considerable subsequent criticism by other feminist theorists (e.g. Lister, 2003), and many would concur with Oakley’s identification of the damaging political implications of such methodological monism:

”The case against quantitative ways of knowing is based on a rejection of reason and science as masculine and an embracing of experience as feminine; but this is essentialist thinking that buys into the very paradox that it protests about... The result is likely to be the construction of ‘difference’ feminism where women are described as owning distinctive ways of thinking, knowing and feeling, and the danger is that these new moral characterisations will play into the hands of those who use gender as a means of discriminating against women’ (1998:725)

A related point here is the unquestioned assumption that qualitative methods are always used for progressive purposes. For example, in his definitive study of the politics of

marketing of the British Labour party, Dominic Wring (2005) demonstrates how a self-styled modernising tendency used qualitative focus group studies strategically to justify the jettisoning of social-democratic policies and shift the party towards the political right. Apart from questioning the rigour of these studies, Wring demonstrates that a major reason for their appeal and influence for the labour leadership in the 1980s was their *qualitative* nature. During this period, the party leadership was desperate to connect with the concerns and aspirations of key marginal voters and focus groups were seen as offering a magical solution to this conundrum. Not only did these studies amplify the influence of these ‘quality minorities’ on the shaping of party policy to the detriment of others, the findings were also used to legitimise a centralisation of control, erode the party’s democratic structures and give prominence to disturbingly reactionary discourses. For example, in 1987 the then Communications Director of the party used focus group findings to claim that Labour was out of touch and associated with ‘gays’, ‘Marxists’ and ‘strange things’ (Wring, 2006: 79).

Restrictive implications

Implicit in all of the criticisms I have raised is a belief that cultural studies’ aversion to quantification is closing off academic avenues and political options. In this section, I want to identify more precisely what I believe these restrictive implications to be.

The first relates to methodological difficulties that can be created by imprecise ‘quasi-quantification’. As noted, it is possible to detect a latent quantitative impulse in many pieces of cultural studies research, but there are occasions where this reluctance to engage in systematic counting creates analytical vagueness, and even internal contradictions and logical inconsistencies. Graham Murdock furnishes an illustration of this point with reference to a study of audience responses to a television drama documentary about IRA bombings in Birmingham (Roscoe *et al*, 1995). Although the study was based on the qualitative analysis of twelve focus group interviews, Murdock identifies two pivotal quantitative statements in the analysis:

- “There are *many occasions* in the group discussions where participants drew on their classified group membership to inform their reading” (Roscoe et al. 1995: 96; emphasis added)

- “There were *many instances* of participants moving outside of the particular ‘interest’ and ‘non-interest’ classifications used in this study as they made sense of the issues.’ (Roscoe et al. 1995: 98; emphasis added)

As Murdock notes, without additional quantitative elaboration, these statements appear mutually contradictory:

‘We are not told how often each practice occurred, whether one was more common than the other, who was most likely to engage in them and in which contexts, or even whether they were different people or the same individuals at different points of the discussion. All of these features of the situation could be very simply expressed in numerical form. Far from reducing the complexity of the analysis, calculating these figures would deepen it by establishing the patterning of practice and by suggesting new dimensions of interpretation’ (Murdock, 1997: 182)

A second restrictive implication of the cultural studies’ disengagement with quantification is that it limits the capacity of the field to deconstruct statistical evidence *on its own terms*. This displays an odd incuriosity for an enterprise so wedded to deconstruction. More seriously, it can become a form of political abdication. To dismiss all statistics as artificial constructs is to assume that all are as bad as each other, which is patently a fatuous generalisation. It is certainly true that statistics do not speak for themselves and should never be taken on face value. They need to be read critically. But, to acknowledge the constructed nature of statistics is not the same as saying they are inevitably corrupt. The validity of numerical evidence is determined by the competence of its conceptualisation, the meticulousness of its collation and the rigour in its interpretation. These can only be ascertained by close and careful scrutiny. Moreover, we cannot ignore the pervasive belief that numbers have greater scientific rigour and objectivity than other kinds of evidence, however much we might want to challenge it. Indeed, it is because statistics have this rhetorical power that critical analysts must have the capability to engage in an imminent critique of statistics when identifying and confronting their rhetorical and political abuses. As Inglis remarks:

‘[A] student of culture must be statistically numerate. This is even more intractably true when the student is preoccupied by questions of power... Power, crude coercive power, will always try to wrest numbers for its own purposes, like the bastard it is. Freedom will always oppose it, and discover the uses and abuses of statistics with which to affront power’ (1993: 123)

A third restrictive implication of avoiding quantification is that it disengages cultural studies from wider public policy debates. For example, Tony Bennett has long argued that if cultural studies is to have any political influence in the formation of cultural policy, it must have the capability to understand and engage with ‘governmental calculations’ (1992: 35). One example he provides is of the need to be able to challenge official ‘performance indicators’ in cultural policy that are rooted in economic rationalist criteria:

‘In this regard, people with the capacity to do sophisticated statistical and economic work, have a major contribution to make to work at the cultural studies/ policy interface – perhaps more than those who engage solely in cultural critique. (1992: 35)

A similar point has been advanced by Angela McRobbie in her criticism of the tendency within cultural studies to dismiss empiricism (along with ethnography and ‘experience’) as “[an] artificially coherent narrative fiction”. In her view, such purism makes it difficult for researchers

“to participate in facts and figures” oriented policy debates, or indeed in relation to the social problem whose roots seemed to lie in innovative cultural practices, for example, the rise of rave and dance cultures and the consumption among young people of E’s (i.e. Ecstasy). It has instead been left to sociologists like Jason Ditton in Glasgow to do the dirtier work of developing policies on youth cultures like rave, which necessitate having access to reliable facts, figures and even ‘ethnographic accounts’ to be able to argue with angry councillors, police and assorted moral guardians” (1996: 337-8).

A fourth major limitation of non-engagement with quantitative methods is the ability of the field to adequately address questions of power. As discussed, cultural studies

privileges fine-grained analysis. This is valuable in many respects, not least in offering a corrective to over-generalised and deterministic structural analyses of power. However, a theoretical and methodological orientation that is exclusively orientated to micro agency and complexity can easily lead to a negation of the structural forces and inequalities that circumscribe these activities (Ferguson and Golding, 1997: xxvi). This can then transform into overly optimistic celebrations of the semiotic autonomy of cultural consumers and the 'cool' of capitalist culture (McGuigan, 2006). As Oakley notes, with regard to feminist research:

'Women and other minority groups, above all, need 'quantitative' research, because without this it is difficult to distinguish between personal experience and collective oppression. Only large-scale comparative data can determine to what extent the situations of men and women are structurally differentiated' (1999: 251)

The incorporation of extensive methods also provides a more legitimate basis for extrapolating implications beyond the particular, which remains a latent impulse in much cultural studies' work, whatever might be said about the evils of generalization. Crucially, it would provide a corrective to what John Hartley acknowledges as the 'not entirely positive habit' cultural studies has inherited from literary studies of universalising from particularities (2003: 124),

It is important to appreciate that the combination of qualitative-quantitative methods is not just about providing checks and balances to the excesses of each. We should also be alive to the creative possibilities of their combination, in which insights and findings from one strand inform directly the design and development of others. An excellent example of the fruitful combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is offered by Livingstone *et al.*'s research into audience reception of audience participation talk shows. In the first phase of their research, a series of focus group interviews were conducted in conjunction with a textual analysis to explore the complex relations between 'reader, text and context' in this genre (Livingstone *et al.*, 1994: 376, Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). These were followed up by a survey of a random, representative sample 3000 adults, who were asked to fill in a self-completion questionnaire that inquired about their viewing of, and views about, these TV talk-shows.

The results of the focus discussions directly informed the design of the questionnaire: insights derived from unstructured questioning provided guidance for subsequent structured questioning. Furthermore, the aim of the second extensive phase of the research was intended to test the general applicability and representativeness of the initial conclusions. This was because, in the authors' view, questions about the generalisability of findings from small-scale qualitative reception studies were a matter that had 'largely been avoided' in previous focus-group based studies (Livingstone *et al.*, op.cit: 376). Finally, although these different methods produced many *complementary* insights into audience perspectives about TV talk shows, in some areas they generated unique perspectives. On the one hand, 'the focus group interviews identified more complex connections between text and reception, [and] identified contradictions within audience readings' (ibid.). On the other hand, the self-completion questionnaire survey 'highlighted what had been missed in the focus group analysis, namely, the importance of the viewers' age compared to, say, gender or social class' (ibid.).

Concluding Remarks

This discussion has examined the reasons, relevance and restrictive implications of cultural studies' disengagement with quantitative analysis. Some may reject my criticisms as being yet another example of an attack from a hostile sociological 'outsider', but this would misrepresent my view of the field and ignore the fact that many of the concerns I raise have also been articulated by theorists more closely associated with cultural studies (e.g. McRobbie, 1996; Lewis, 1997; Inglis, 1993; Bennett, 1992; Livingstone et al, 1994).

It is true that my discussion has focused exclusively upon what quantitative methods can bring to cultural studies. In view of this, I would like to end on a more positive note, and invite consideration of what cultural studies could bring to quantitative analysis. It is undoubtedly the case that statistics can often be dry, prosaic and of such banality as to be prime candidates for what a sarcastic journalist once defined as the W.I.N.D. award ('Well I Never Did!'). I am convinced that 'the cultural studies imagination' has much to contribute to enriching the rationale, design, presentation and interpretation of quantitative evidence. But this can only be achieved by waking up to broader

developments in the human sciences and embracing the potential of these methods rather than fixating on their limitations.

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