Methodological reflections on Foucauldian analyses

Adopting the pointers of curiosity, nominalism, conceptual grounding and exemplarity

Hansen, Magnus Paulsen; Triantafillou, Peter

Methodological reflections on Foucauldian Analyses:
Adopting the pointers of Curiosity, Nominalism, Conceptual Grounding, and Exemplarity

Magnus Paulsen Hansen and Peter Triantafillou

Abstract

This article seeks to provide a set of pointers for methodological reflections on Foucauldian-inspired analyses of the exercise of power. Michel Foucault deliberately eschewed methodological schemata, which may be why so little has been written on the methodological implications of his analyses. While this article shares the premise that we should refrain from a standardized methodology, it argues that providing broad pointers for analyses informed by the critical ambition and conceptual framework offered by Foucault is both desirable and possible. The article then offers some reflections and general guidelines on how to strengthen the methodological quality of Foucauldian analyses. We argue that the quality of Foucauldian inspired analysis of modern power may gain from methodological reflections around four pointers: curiosity, nominalism, conceptual grounding, and exemplarity.

Keywords: Method, genealogy, relativism, Michel Foucault, critique

> "My role is to address problems effectively, really: and to pose them with the greatest possible rigour, with the maximum complexity and difficulty so that a solution does not arise all at once because of the thought of some reformer or even in the brain of a political party. (Foucault 1991b, 158)

French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault is widely renowned for his historical analyses of madness, punishment, and sexuality. His excavations of how shifting bodies of knowledge enable new ways of exercising power over and through individuals and populations has inspired enormous amounts of empirical analysis covering a wide range of scholarly fields, from sociology (Dean 1994; , Donzelot 1979), political science (Bacchi 2009; Cruikshank 1999; Mitchell 1988), and public administration (Triantafillou 2017) over anthropology (Escobar 1995; e.g., Ferguson 1990), psychology (Rose 1996) and management studies (McKinlay & Starkey 1998; e.g., Townley 1994), to gender studies (Butler 1990) and the history of science (Hacking 1990).

However, despite this extant literature informed by and reflecting upon Foucault's analyses, few deals with questions of method and even fewer, if any, have proposed any fix points enabling more or less systematic reflections and assessments of the quality of these analyses. This

might well be due to Foucault himself explicitly rejecting methodological schemata, even if he did reflect on the methodological principles informing his work on several occasions (e.g. Foucault 1978, 92–102; 1985, 25–32; 1991a). It is telling that a recent, magistral lexicon on Foucault does not provide a single entry on method or methodology (Lawlor and Nale 2015). Foucault motivated this rejection because he wanted to avoid constructing yet another modern regime of truth, yet another science of human agency, that at some point would serve the exercise of power and tame human agency. His studies of the emergence of the human sciences seems to have convinced him that there was, at least in the 1970s, no need for yet another scientific theory whether that be oriented towards political and social engineering, as functionalist social scientist advocated, or some kind of revolution, as the Marxists of this time were propagating.

Despite his rejection of venturing into theory building and to develop methodological edifices, Foucault's analyses relied on meticulous empirical analyses of historical documents. His analyses showed a kind of epistemological modesty avoiding abstract theorizing and an empirical sensitivity to the unfolding of political thoughts and social practices (Mirchandani 2005). It should be obvious, that the pressures for explicit and systematic methodological reflections have grown substantially since Foucault undertook his studies in the 1970s. Today, academic authors are generally required to be very explicit and systematic about how they design their analysis, collect data and analyze these. While this trend towards methodological rigour in many cases stifle new questions and approaches it provides a valid exogenous pressure for being more explicit and reflexive about how Foucauldian analyses of power, *on its own terms*, can enhance methodological and analytical quality. Hence, based on the Foucauldian epistemological and ontological starting point, the article aims to tease out some pointers or fix points to reflect on the methodological quality of Foucauldian analysis. Given Foucault's own insights into the intricate relations between knowledge and power this is not a straight-forward task. It is a matter of carving out pointers of methodological reflection that on the one hand recognize Foucauldian analyses as "counter-positivist" (Foucault 2012, 10) and on the other hand, avoid the pitfalls of approaches of 'qualitative methods' that try to disentangle the power-knowledge nexus through the "reflexivity" of the scholar or "multiple voicing" (see Gergen and Gergen, 2000).

The aim of this article is to provide a set of fix points for methodological reflections on the quality of Foucauldian inspired analyses of modern power relations. We try to meet this aim by navigating between the often murky waters of philosophy of science and mundane method precepts. Thus, we are neither going to provide an epistemological grounding of Foucault's analyses nor a set of strict method standards. Rather we seek to systematize the methodological reflections by identifying certain fix points that we argue are relevant for anyone seeking to conduct a Foucauldian inspired analysis of modern power. In this process, we go through Foucault's explicit methodological reflections and parts, but certainly far from all, of his empirical analyses of power to unearth what methodological principles he actually adopts. These accounts are instrumental to our aim of pinpointing the methodological principles that could be used by the power analyses of other scholars. Due to the multifarious usages of Foucault's writings we believe

the pointers are relevant for a wide range of political and social science disciplines, including the vast number of analyses identifying themselves as 'governmentality studies'.

We *do* find several works reflecting on the methodological implications of Foucault's analyses, including several excellent introductions to the key analytical principles of Foucault's analyses (Scheurich & McKenzie 2008; Villadsen, 2020). Other works discuss the analytical implications of Foucault's particular way of practicing critique (Koopman 2013; Vogelman 2017). Finally, there are a few studies on the ways in which the work of Foucault tackles the relationship between scientific discourses and politics and what implications this approach has for the epistemological status of Foucault's own analyses (Flyvbjerg 2001; Glynos & Howarth 2007). These works are crucial because they painstakingly show that Foucauldian analytics cannot be reduced to relativist, anything goes kind of stories, but constitute very meticulous and well documented analyses of how scientific discourses interrelate with power in modern societies. Still, even Flyvbjerg's, Glynos and Howart's insightful accounts are not very specific on the methodological approach or fix points for reflecting on the quality of Foucauldian analyses. The same applies to Bacchi's Foucault-inspired 'what's the problem to represented to be?' framework for policy analysis (Bacchi 2009).

At the more concrete level, we find several attempts at formulating methodological guidelines within the field of discourse analysis inspired by Michel Foucault. Perhaps the best-known attempt is Norman Fairclough's writings on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003). His suggestions are well argued and consistent. However, it operates with a set of ontological assumptions about social reality as well epistemological ambitions inspired by critical realism that has little if anything to do with Foucault's analytics. Moreover, like most others in the field of discourse analysis, it offers no suggestions on how to deal with Foucault's distinct approach on the analysis of power (e.g., Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine 2008). Kendal and Wickham (1999) published an introductory reader to some of the basic methodological principles of Foucault's analyses, including attention to non-judgmental forms of criticism and a focus on contingencies rather than causes. Yet when the book seeks to become more concrete in translating these principles into actual analysis, it moves into science and technology-type studies inspired by Bruno Latour. In the area of modern accounting, Kearins and Hooper (2002) have argued and illustrated how genealogical analysis as a history of the present should be based on contemporary concerns, albeit without falling into the trap of presentism or teleological readings of history. In Danish, Kaspar Villadsen (2006) has provided several useful reflections on genealogy as a method and argues that the documents selected for analysis should be exemplary rather than representative of the kind of power under scrutiny.

In sum, while we find a large body of literature addressing Foucault's analyses, very few of these works deal with mundane questions pertaining to method. With a few important exceptions mentioned above, basic methodological concerns regarding validity and reliability are therefore either not dealt with at all or merely dealt with in passing. This is highly problematic for several reasons. Firstly, the consequence of neglecting these issues and refusing to provide an answer to them is that Foucauldian analyses are excluded from a wide range of mainstream

publication outlets, since judged on (positivist) mainstream methodology, Foucauldian analyses appears relativistic, unsystematic, and unsound. In turn, this either reduces the scope for intellectual exchange between mainstream academia and the Foucauldian analyses that seek to unsettle the mainstream or it may lead to students and scholars inspired by Foucault to resort to the standard handbooks in qualitative methods that most often derive their methodological procedures from other theoretical traditions.

Secondly, and above all, the risk of not debating these questions is that Foucauldian analysis degenerates into orthodox analysis simply confirming existing fashions or traditions, rather than developing itself curiously according to the new political struggles and power games taking place around us. This is an ever-more pertinent issue due to the increasing employment of Foucault's concepts and analytical approach in several fields. As the most cited author in social sciences, Foucault has more than one million citations (almost 400,000 since 2015). Without some fix points for reflecting on the methodological quality, Foucauldian analysis risks becoming imbued with a complacent and self-evident claim to truth that Foucault himself constantly sought to question.

The aim of this article, then, is to provide some pointers for methodological reflections on the validity of Foucauldian analyses of the exercise of modern forms of power. It should be stressed that we use the term pointers here as fix points for reflecting and assessing methodological quality. We suggest that methodological reflections such analyses should take place around four broad fix points: curiosity, nominalism, conceptual grounding, and exemplarity. When speaking of validity and reliability we think of these in the most common sensical meaning of the terms: validity implying that the analysis and claims made are logically consistent and well-grounded, reliability entailing trust in the claims made by the analyst, a trust ensured above all by the meticulous documentation of such claims. In the words of Foucault, genealogy was "grey, meticulous and patiently documentary" (Foucault 1977b). Such documentation is a precondition for enabling other researchers to probe the claims made by the genealogist. The four pointers relate to different elements of the analytical process. Curiosity relates to research design and data collection, nominalism to the interpretation and accounting of data, conceptual grounding to conceptualization or theorization, and exemplarity to the scope of claims made. The former three pointers thus address issues of internal validity, i.e. consistency between the use of concepts and the empirical phenomena analyzed under their reach. In contrast, exemplarity deals with the question of external validity by urging the analyst to explicate how, in what sense and, possibly, to what extent the analyzed phenomenon is exemplary of wider political and social practices. The question of reliability pertains to all four pointers. In what follows we present the four pointers of methodological reflection one by one. We explicate how they derive from Foucault's thinking and analyses and suggest several questions that analysts can ask themselves to reflect on the quality of their analysis. We conclude the article by discussing to what extend the pointers are distinctly Foucauldian.

Curiosity

The key purpose of Foucauldian-inspired analysis is to provide a critical account of power relations. In contrast to physical violence, Foucault saw power as a "mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on" but an "action the action of others" and thus entails some level of freedom as well as some way in which human beings are transformed into subjects (Foucault 1982, 789-90). Hence, analysis is intended neither to prove that a certain form of power is more or less legitimate nor to reduce complex social phenomena to simple questions of domination. These critical accounts of power should give precedence to the question of "how" over the questions of "what is power?" and "where does it come from?" (Foucault 1982, 786).

Foucauldian-inspired analysis can be said to aim for a distinctive "non-normative critique" that "refuses to develop a framework of normative standards with which to evaluate the desirability of power relations, institutions, structures and thus it also refuses to take up the role of reform designer" (Triantafillou 2012, p. 6). Instead, non-normative critique seeks to repoliticize power and pervasive forms of governing by making them contestable (Author A 2016). Repoliticization here cannot be reduced to the facile claim that everything, including knowledge, is political. Instead, it entails analysis actually demonstrating the "non-necessity of any form of power" (Foucault 2014, 78) and "shaking false self-evidence" (Foucault 1991a). Curiosity towards complexity also entails a caution towards binaries of domination and resistance. Although Foucault suggested to use present 'forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point' or 'chemical catalyst' for analyses (Foucault 1982, 780) he often pointed to intricate and ambiguous relations between power and resistance. For instance, his governmentality lectures point to how modern forms of power ascended from critiques of competing forms of governing (Foucault 2007). Thus, forms of resistance and critique, including those inspired by Foucauldian analyses, bear the risk of becoming "phagocyted and digested by behavioral and institutional modes" (Foucault 2000, 457), i.e. 'turned inside out' to affirmative modes of governing (Larsen 2011,38; Author A 2016).

The distinct genealogical analysis of history conducted by Foucault and more recent scholars are deeply informed by curiosity (Foucault 1977; Darnton 1968; Triantafillou and Moreira 2005). With his lectures on neoliberalism as an important exception (Foucault 2008), Foucault's analyses focused on events dating back to the nineteenth century or earlier. These historical studies were driven by a curiosity aligned with the aim of re-politicizing current forms of power. By pointing to the contingent genesis and contestability of contemporary forms of power, genealogy functions as "histories of the present" (Foucault 1977a, 31; Kritzman, 1988, 262; Revel 2010). The rationale is to create alienation from contemporary epistemological and moral horizons and limitations. On the one hand, genealogy does not seek provide exhaustive accounts of a given historical period simply for the sake of getting to know history better. Instead, genealogy is driven by an explicit tactical purpose, as it is always an intervention in the present (Author A 2016). On the other hand, genealogy's re-politicizing ambition is always underpinned by an ethos of curiosity that entails that the analyst goes at great pains in searching for the unexpected twists, shifts and

even continuities in the exercise of power. Continuities also includes often uncomfortable insights into how forms of resistance and critique often rely on, rather than contend, dominant power relations.

It might be worth quoting Foucault at length on his reflections on the role of curiosity for his own work:

> As for what motivated me, it is quite simple; I would hope that in the eyes of some people it might be sufficient in itself. It was curiosity – the only kind of curiosity, in any case, that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself. After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself? (Foucault 1987, 9)

The analysis, in other words, should always be open-ended and explorative at its core. Foucault was thus calling for the researcher never to "be completely comfortable with your own certainties. Never let them sleep, but believe either that a new fact will be enough to reverse them" (Foucault 1997, 144). If this analytical pointer bears a certain resemblance to Popperian falsification, the reasons for remaining curious differ. Rather than a precondition for testing and refining universal truth claims, curiosity in Foucauldian analyses is a precondition for ensuring the precedence of the "how" question. Since formations of power are continuously modulated according to new problems, fields and critique, the analyst of power must subject existing concepts to critical reflections and empirical grounding, see section on conceptual grounding below. Moreover, empirical accounts and diagnoses must be intersubjectively recognizable, see section on nominalism below.

This instrumental approach to analyses as practice-oriented "toolboxes" (Foucault & Deleuze 1977, 208) has been taken by some to imply that if our analysis is criticizing power by pointing to its repressive effects, then anything goes in the sense that we can pick and choose data that bear evidence to the researcher's preconception of the immanently repressive effects of certain social relations. Examples can be found but are not confined to certain gender studies (e.g. MacKinnon 1989; Young 1990) and studies using the Foucauldian term biopolitics to claim that it constitutes a more or less universal (Hardt & Negri 2000) and trans-historical modality of power (Agamben 1998). In the latter case, for instance, Agamben's transhistorical understanding of biopower that works by the sovereign act of stripping individuals of civil and political rights to become bare life is highly problematic since it fails to pass the curiosity test. By claiming that biopower is always an invariable mode of sovereign act of violence, it becomes an intrinsic characteristic of the state that self-evidently explains events, such as the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic (Agamben 2020). In this way, such analyses, suffer from similar innate state phobia that Foucault ascribed to neoliberal thought in which "an analysis of social security and the administrative apparatus on which it rests ends up, via some slippages and thanks to some plays

on words, referring us to the analysis of concentration camps" (Foucault 2008, 188). Importantly, it does not allow Agamben to address the historically shifting, multifarious and often contradictory workings of power that cannot be foreseen by the analyst (for more examples see Brady 2014).

The methodological reflections around curiosity may also shape data collection. Documents – including both texts and various paintings and architectural drawings – constituted the exclusive source of data in Foucault' analysis. This is no surprise considering his focus on events taking place during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Documents still remain the preferred data source by Foucauldian inspired scholars partly for some of the same reasons, but also because – pace the former Trump administration - documents remain today the preferred medium for arguing and justifying the need for exercising political power or, alternatively, to resist it. Still, as many of the studies inspired by Foucault's analytics of power address contemporary modes of power only, these studies should consider using other forms of data, at least as a supplement to documents. As suggested elsewhere, the use of ethnographic methods and other in situ tools of data production, such as interviews, observation and extended case methods, may enhance our insights into how power works through the freedom or self-subjectification of individuals (e.g., Meriluoto 2017; Brady 2014). Such data collection tools may not only allow analysts to explicate and reflect on their theoretical assumptions and analytical concepts, but also to question or even falsify their preconceptions concerning the functioning of contemporary power.

At the most general level, we should look not only for the usual documents, such as laws, the writings of key political thinkers, and speeches by leading policymakers, regardless of how relevant they all may be, but also for sources that today or even at the time were deemed ridiculous. Thus, Foucault and others have insisted on "tactical polyvalence of discourses", i.e. the historically shifting authority and uses that various forms of knowledge may be attributed (Foucault 1978, 100–102). It is this unpredictability and surprising reversals of power-knowledge relations that has informed studies of subjugated knowledges, such as the premodern treatment of the insane (Foucault 1967), spiritualism (Triantafillou and Moreira 2005), and mesmerism (Darnton 1968), not because they represent more or less truthful bodies of knowledge, but because by examining their rise and fall, their formation and transformation, we may unsettle present preconceptions – including the analyst's own – about how contemporary power–knowledge relations were formed and how they function. Reflections on the usefulness data sources, then, is not so much a question of whether they are authoritative but instead whether they contain explicit reflections on how and why power should be exercised. Such documents should make explicit the reflections regarding the procedures and regimes of truth-telling that informed the exercise of power. Conversely, this means that what is today considered canonical texts of by political thinkers may not be so relevant.

In sum, the curiosity pointer implies that analysts ask themselves the following questions:

- Is the analytical approach and data collection driven by the question of "how?" rather than immutable preconceptions regarding the machinations of power?
- To what extent are the research problem and research questions open-ended (i.e., allowing for diverse and unexpected answers)?
- To what extent is the data material selected with a view to questioning rather than confirming existing diagnoses, and does the analysis of this data consider counter-intuitive findings?

Nominalism

Whereas the pointer of curiosity may guide how the researcher frames questions and data selection, it provides no answers to questions pertaining to data interpretation. We suggest that the interpretations should be underpinned by a nominalist approach in the sense of being restricted to analyzing utterances and the justifications of social actions at face value and restrain from normative judgments on these. Somewhat ironically, Foucault conceded to being regarded a positivist if that implied analyzing the "positivity of a discourse" rather than trying to identify the hidden interests, motivations, structures, or telos behind this or that group of statements (Foucault 1974). True, Foucault made this statement in the context of his archaeological analysis of scientific discourses (epistemes) and would later abandon the quasi-theoretical ambitions of the knowledge archaeologies (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982). Yet this surface reading approach was carried over into his genealogical analyses where he examined how the exercise of power is linked and predicated on ways of producing and uttering the truth through the so-called human sciences (Lemke 2007; Foucault 1991a). Thus, the exercise of power would be analyzed neither in terms of the (underlying) interests of political actors nor in terms of (underlying) class structures, but rather in the quite explicit procedures, techniques, and schemes by which the truth about a certain social phenomenon was produced through human and social sciences, such as psychiatry (Foucault 1967), biomedicine (Foucault 1973), criminology (Foucault 1977a), and political economy (Procacci 1993).

If the study of forms of knowledge purporting to tell the truth about people and the societies they render visible was a fundamental object of Foucault's analyses, it is less than obvious how we may account for the analysis of the role played by knowledge in the exercise of power. Foucauldian analysis does not aim to question the validity or legitimacy of scientific knowledge, but rather to show how they emerged and functioned regimes of truth or veridiction. For example, the point is not to prove the degree to which disciplinary power really does discipline citizens, such as criminal offenders; rather, the task is to show how disciplinary techniques and other forms of power emerged and interacted with new bodies of expert knowledge about the psyche or subjectivity of individuals and their social environments in a given societal setting and historical period. This nominalist approach entails accepting at face value the at times very simplistic concepts and understandings offered by other social scientists, such as Gary Becker's

understanding of crime. We can think of this as aiming towards accounts that remains loyal to the original utterances (Author A 2016). When dealing with historical sources this loyalty and the intersubjective acceptance it enables is usually not possible, but Foucault's account of same Becker's thought is an illustrative case that intersubjective acceptance is possible. After reading Foucault's lectures on Becker's human capital theory, Becker noted that "he was accurate on what it has to say" (Becker et al. 2012). Unfortunately, this nominalist approach have been taken as sign of Foucault being "seduced" by neoliberalism (see Zamora and Behrent, 2015). However, this criticism neglects the deliberate exclusion of value judgments (see Author A, 2015). The point is not to distinguish "between acceptable from unacceptable" forms of power (Fraser 1989 in Author A, 2016) but to understand the rationalities of government and their consequences in terms of what power relations they produce, such as, in the case of Becker, a "do-not-laisser-faire government" installing a "permanent economic tribunal" (Foucault 2008, 247).

Not surprisingly, the centrality of the 'how?' rather than the 'why?' makes Foucauldian analysis differ fundamentally from (post-)positivist, quantitative style social science methods seeking to test more or less universal mechanisms of causality. However, rather than assuming that there is or that there is no such thing as madness, the nominalist approach entails asking how scientific discourses rendered "madness" and "mad persons" visible and the objects of new curative interventions. This approach differs importantly from many current qualitative analyses that take their point of departure in the meaning produced by human subjects. Here, it may be worth comparing with the so-called 'interpretive turn' that is defined as a turn away from conceptualizing humans as 'objects' and towards 'meaning-focused and person-centered concerns' (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea 2013, xiv). As the diversity of interpretive studies demonstrate, there are many ways to operationalize this move towards a 'meaning-focused' and 'person-centered' approach. In the case of mental illness, this approach would imply attributing unique authority and truth-value to the utterances of citizens suffering mental illness. There is obviously nothing wrong with paying attention to subjective utterances. But by focusing only on such utterances, the interpretive approach risks neglecting the role played both by objectifying discursive practices, such as psychiatry, and the subjectifying ones, such as psychoanalysis, in the treatment and exercise of power over patients. The genealogical analysis instead includes both objectifying *and* subjectifying practices (Rose 1996). Thus, the analytics of power follows essentially the same methodological reflections and principles regardless of whether it focuses on the production of objects or of subjects. While interpretive studies tend to elevate the discourses produced by a particular method, postcolonial studies tend to elevate the discourses produced by particular groups, such as the orientalized people (Said 1979) or the subaltern (Spivak 1988). If the interpretive method seems to endorse a simple reversal of the evidence hierarchy (privileging interviews and case-studies over large quantitative surveys and experiments), the postcolonial studies seem to endorse a simple reversal of the voices that should talk with authority (subaltern instead of colonizers, indigenous instead of settlers, coloured instead of whites, etc.). The postcolonial reversal is highly problematic because it risks ignoring the ways in which indigenous and nationalist claims were and are used to discriminate and persecute other citizens. Thus, these

reversals come with the price of ignoring the ways in which subjectivist methods and the discourses produced by subaltern groups may be entangled with the exercise of power.

Nominalism may serve both as a pointer of reflection and a certain guideline for understanding the complex relations between power and knowledge. However, the highly descriptive does not imply providing causal explanations in line with currently predominant approaches that objectify social practices into measurable variables. Rather than trying to reduce complex social relations to a few variables of supposedly more or less universal force, Foucauldian analysis allows for 'multiplication or pluralization of causes' (Foucault 1991a, 76) acknowledging a wide range of forces at stake in any given situation where power is exercised. Moreover, instead of trying to separate these causal forces into independent and dependent variables, Foucault's analyses seek to grasp the mutual interdependency between them by providing empirical documentation accounting for how distinct social practices were interlinked so as to form a particular assemblage in a specific society in a certain historical period.

Thus, Foucauldian analysis seeks to understand the development and functioning of power by producing contextualized accounts of the employment of specific techniques of power and the forms of knowledge and lines of reasoning informing the employment of these techniques (Glynos & Howarth 2007). How did the development of certain rationalities of government and regimes of truth enable such practices and subjectivities? In brief, while the conceptual apparatus should not be a one-to-one image of those used by the persons or organizations studied in the field, the analytical conceptions should have a clear relationship to the thoughts, expressions, and vocabularies expressed by the studied persons or organizations.

Strengthening the validity through the nominalist pointer then implies that analysts address the following questions:

- Are the utterances presented extensively and at face value and without judgmental evaluations?
- To what extent are the rationalities and regimes of truth that you claim to be important for the exercise of power positively evident in the data?
- Are the interpretations truthful to the original utterances without reducing reflections and practices to hidden intentions, functions, or structures?

Conceptual Grounding

The question of interpreting and presenting data leads to the question of the role of concepts and theory in Foucauldian analyses. This is perhaps the trickiest element in terms of validity of Foucauldian analyses. Conceptual validity (Sartori 1970; Adcock & Collier 2001) essentially entails ensuring consistency between the concepts seeking to grasp a social phenomenon and the pointers used to objectify the phenomenon. To ensure this kind of validity, we must be as precise as possible in explicating the use of analytical concepts: To what social phenomena do they refer

(or not)? Understood in this manner, there are clear challenges of validity both in the works of Foucault and those of his followers regarding the consistency in how concepts such as power, discourse, and neoliberalism are applied. Obviously, it is necessary with a certain openness of a concept to grasp a reality that to some extent remains unknown. Such openness is the whole point of genealogy and, we would claim, science in general. Yet, to allow other scholars to re-examine and, thus, trust the descriptive and relational arguments made in Foucauldian-inspired analyses, it is also necessary that the concepts be used in an explicit and consistent manner – if not across different analyses, then at least within the individual analysis. Moreover, the genealogist should explicate the how the concepts are operationalized, i.e. how and to what extent they pinpoint the empirical phenomenon falling inside and those falling (closely) outside their reach.

Foucault intended his concepts to work as tools to enable the visualization and understanding of aspects of reality that he found received inadequate attention in existing political and social analyses. Take the concept of *panopticon* (Foucault 1977a), that was deployed by Foucault to make visible the rationality of disciplinary forms of power. Although it was coined by Bentham to describe an architecture of prisons, Foucault used it in a much broader sense to describe a technique of power that seeks to govern the conduct of individuals by stipulating their own self-surveillance through spatial and temporal ordering. While some historians criticized Foucault for overstating the real influence of panopticism for penal practice, he argued that the panopticon ''represented the abstract formula of a very real technology, that of individuals'' (1977a: 225), and that these disciplinary technologies, which obviously often failed to accomplish their own goals, spread to several institutional sites during the 19th century. In this sense, these concepts are not intended as Weberian ideal types that seek to distil the essence of a complex social phenomena or to measure the latter against such an ideal (Foucault 1991a) but rather attuned to address real and observable calculations, reflections, procedures, and techniques of conduct.

But avoiding ideal-type concepts does not solve the conceptual validity problem. The problem here is both that of a changing *and* unclear referent. Foucault himself changed how he used key terms such as power, discourse, and knowledge several times throughout this authorship as he tried to address new dimensions of these phenomena. Such conceptual changes may be frustrating for those striving for developing fixed definitions. However, it is counter-productive to try to provide a single, universal conception of, say, power, if the purpose is to spur analyses of hitherto neglected parts of this complex and over-time changing phenomenon. Rather than going for fixed definitions, a more productive solution is to go for explicit definitions that are grounded in the empirical analysis.

This leads us to the second conceptual challenge, namely that of the unclear referent. Foucault and many of his followers use concepts that work at a high level of abstraction, which risk obscuring exactly what kind of social phenomena these analyses refer to – and which they do not. Analytical concepts like regimes of truth, dispositive, and governmentality are rather broad terms and embrace several very diverse social phenomena. Foucault himself tried to specify his use of concepts by tying them to social phenomena located more or less precisely in time and

space. Thus, Foucault coined concepts such as sovereignty, discipline, pastoral power and biopower to denote distinct forms of power and tease out their specific functioning in particular historical and societal contexts. The problem of conceptual stretching is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the case of the term "neoliberalism." Foucault himself used it to denote a form of rationality of government that worked through the construction of markets, on the one hand, and the enabling of the rational choice and competitive capacities of citizens and organizations on the other (Foucault 2007). He went on to distinguish between two distinct forms of neoliberalism emerging in post-WWII West Germany and the US, respectively. Today, however, the term is used by a wide range of scholars often in rather indiscriminate ways to denote anything relating to the development of contemporary capitalism or reforms seeking to make the public sector work more efficiently (Venugopal 2015). In our view, the solution to this problem is neither to abandon the concept altogether nor to propagate conceptual policing. Rather, we need to be as explicit as possible about how we define and use a particular concept. Exactly what kind of thoughts, knowledges, and types of political action are we trying to grasp, and which ones are we excluding? In order to answer these questions, studies should not only focus on the rationalities of government and their intellectual history, which has been the focus of many governmentality studies (O'Malley, Weir, & Shearing 1997), but also on procedures, schemes, and techniques invested in the exercise of power. Recently, we have seen interesting attempts at remedying this neglect by way of ethnographic methods illuminating how neoliberal governmentalities interact with non-liberal governmentalities in the concrete exercise of power (Brady 2014).

In sum, conceptual grounding implies that analysts ask themselves the following questions:

- To what extent is the concept attuned to the historical and societal context of the analyzed power relation?
- Is the concept clearly explained in terms of references to the ideas, utterances, and practices that the concept seeks to grasp?
- Conversely, is it clear which ideas, utterances, and practices fall outside of the concept?
- Does the conceptual boundary (enabling inclusion and exclusion) allow for novel and potentially surprising insights?

Exemplarity

The emergence of the social sciences, such as anthropology, economics, sociology and political science, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was informed by a mix of lofty scientific ideals of creating true and universally valid knowledge about the emerging industrialized societies, and by mundane administrative and political demands for useful insights and answers on how to effectively govern the many problems facing these societies. Both scientists and political reformers were and are acutely interested in the universal reach of social science knowledge, i.e.

the extent to which it can be generalized. Some have taken this drive for generalization as a sign of modern-power relations and argued that Foucauldian inspired analyses of power should confine themselves to localized accounts with limited generalizability (Bastalich 2009). We agree that the quest for producing generalizable or even universally valid knowledge is highly problematic. Yet rather than being for or against generalization, we think that the question is how to create what Foucault called 'effective history', a term closely inspired by Nietzsche's notion of *wirklische historie* (Foucault 1977). The latter is an analysis of power that is at once unsettling and convincing, and is predicated on being exemplary (Owen 1995; Villadsen 2006). Foucault's ambition with examining power-knowledge relations was not to provide generalized accounts of French society in a certain historical period but to provide *exemplars* of, then, emerging modalities of power that are somehow still with us today (Owen 1995). Exemplarity entails that data is selected in order to illustrate, in the most lucid way, the rationalities and (dis)continuities of such modalities (Villadsen 2006, 101). The point then of reflecting on generalization is not to enable totalizing societal diagnoses but rather to provide studies of the exercise of power which is selected in such a manner that they stand out as illuminating examples, often as somewhat pointy and not very typical examples (Pacewicz 2020), which may be conducive to raising an academic and perhaps even wider public debate about the desirability of the analyzed mode of power.

Exemplarity has already engendered several methodological reflections and discussions over the validity of case studies. Much of the debate here has evolved around if and how the knowledge produced via case studies can be generalized (Seawright and Gerring 2008). Others have argued that the merits of case studies lies not with their (limited) capacity to produce more or less universally valid knowledge, but with their ability to produce contextualized accounts of political and social practices that are meaningful and practically relevant both for those exercising power and those resisting it (Flyvbjerg 2001). More precisely, this entails selecting cases, examples of power relations and practices, that may be extreme, critical or paradigmatic (ibid. pp. 78-80). While the practices selected are not to be considered typical or representative, they are selected with the intent of pointing to wider political and social practices or – what proved to be – crucial historical transformations of power relations.

It is the task then of the analyst to convince the readers of the analysis' point to or resonance with wider political and social practices. Apart from using the insights from the case study debates, we may also usefully distinguish between spatial and temporal exemplarity. With regards to the former Foucault (1991a), on several occasions, exclaimed that his analyses should not be regarded as general mappings of society in a given period. Similarly, he rejected that modern, industrialized societies are exclusively pervaded by a single form of power (Foucault 1982). Nevertheless, Foucault's analyses have often been adopted to say just that. Gilles Deleuze's (1995) famous "Postscript on the Societies of Control," which is explicitly inspired by Foucault's analysis of penal practice regimes, explains that "disciplinary societies" have now been succeeded by another logic by which "control mechanisms" have transgressed the spatial boundaries of disciplinary institutions. This epochal reading of Foucault has reappeared in several more recent works (Hard & Negri 2000; Jensen 2012). Foucault himself at times suggested that his analysis of

the French prison system between 1780 and 1830 was part of a wider trend in that period that unfolded in other countries in Western Europe and North America, even if he never analyzed these cases. Yet, Foucault often pointed to the co-existence of a range of different forms of power (Foucault 2007). More importantly, he regarded the analysis of the prison as an extreme but exemplary case of wider disciplinary practices in 19th century France (Foucault 1977a). The point of selecting extreme cases of a certain form of power, such as the employment of discipline in prisons, was less to claim that French society and the conduct of its citizens became fully disciplined, which obviously did not happen (Foucault 1991a). Rather, the analysis of the spread and institutionalization of these disciplinary techniques into schools, factories, army barracks, asylums and hospitals was intended as an (uncomfortable) eye-opener: This is *how* discipline works when allowed to unfold in its most pure and unchallenged form (i.e., in the prison).

With regards to temporality, the point remains that Foucault's analyses are prone to excessive generalizing claims because they claim to have a relevance that goes well beyond the period of analysis. They were, as mentioned, meant to be histories of the present. In his famous article *What is Enlightenment?*, he explained that while he considered his investigations historically and spatially specific, "they have their generality, in the sense that they have continued to recur up to our time; for example the problem of the relationship between sanity and insanity, or sickness and health, or crime and the law; the problem of the role of sexual relations, an so on" (Foucault 1986, 49). Foucault's analysis of the forms of self-conduct or ethics around sexuality, dieting, and citizenship in Ancient Athens and Rome may serve as another example of Foucault's particular way of trying to create a resonance between ancient ethical practices and contemporary ones (Foucault 1987, 1988). These analyses purport neither to encompass the entirety of ethical practices in Ancient Athens and Rome nor to serve as regulatory ideals for sexual conduct in contemporary societies. Rather, they are intended to make us question current codes of conduct and realize that our space for reforming them might be much wider than we imagined. The ancient ethical practices are thus selected for analysis because they are recognizable and therefore something with which we can identify, but at the same time they distant and foreign to us, thereby exemplifying the contingency of what we think the good life is and how it should be led (Villadsen, 2006).

In sum, Foucauldian analyses should address and hopefully improve their external validity by reflecting upon as well as documenting to what extend the modalities of power are exemplary of other regimes of practices at the given time and today. The reflections over exemplarity should not necessarily aim to produce generalizable knowledge. Yet, they should entail explicating how the power practices and relations selected for analysis point to or resonate with wider political and social processes and powers today.

The exemplarity pointer therefore implies that analysts ask themselves the following questions:

- What is the wider political and social context in which the selected practices and reflections are situated?

- In what ways are the selected practices extreme, critical or paradigmatic examples of wider political and social practices at the time?
- In what ways are the analysed power practices and relation (of the past) speaking to the exercise of power today? In what ways are they similar and yet different?

Conclusion

The ongoing methodological debates about the (lacking) scientificity and methodological rigour of genealogy and other poststructuralist analysis reveal the need to unfold and explicate the methodological suggestions provided by Michel Foucault himself. Questions of the validity and reliability of Foucauldian analysis may rightfully be seen as an oxymoron. As noted earlier, Foucault himself described his practice as "counter-positivism" (Foucault 2012) or even as "antisciences" but this was *not* equal to "demand the lyrical right to be ignorant, and not that they reject knowledge, or invoke or celebrate some immidiate experience that has yet to be captured by knowledge" (Foucault 2003, 9). In other words, Foucauldian analysis entails methodological rigour in the sense of systematic reflections on the methodological quality of the analysis of power relations.

This article has proposed four pointers for methodological reflections on the quality of Foucauldian-inspired analyses of power relations: curiosity, nominalism, conceptual grounding, and exemplarity. Scholars from outside the world of poststructuralist analysis may still find our substantive qualification of the four methodological pointers incompatible with the mainstream conception of (social) science. By explicating the distinct Foucauldian approach to the fix points of methodological reflection, we have sought to highlight how the differences between mainstream and Foucauldian analyses are not a matter of rigorous or systematic methods *per se* but rather different epistemological interests.

The two other pointers, nominalism and exemplarity, are more likely to raise the ire of mainstream social scientists. The nominalist refusal to judge on the epistemological value of the examined discourse may be accused of leading straight to epistemological relativism (Staricco 2019). As explained, there is a very good point in abstaining from epistemological evaluation. To dismiss, for example, discourses like geopolitics and eugenics (or even neo-classical economics) as pseudo-sciences closes the door to examining how and why they could take such an important scientific and political role in a certain historical period. We argued that certain forms of qualitative scholarship – often implicitly but at times explicitly – reject nominalism. This is particularly clear within parts of postcolonial, racial and immigration studies in which the voices of repressed groups are often regarded as epistemologically superior to various scientific discourses, such as (mainstream) economics, political science or sociology. Within some forms of interpretive and phenomenological studies we found a similar ambition of elevating certain discourses produced by a limited set of methods, notably interviews and observations enabling interpretation

of subjective utterances. Both forms of discursive privileging may come with the price of ignoring the entanglement of the privileged discourses with the exercise of power.

The methodological pointer of exemplarity may also be criticized for its very particularistic approach to the wider question of external validity or, more precisely, how the power practices and relations selected relate to wider political and social processes. The pointer provides the analyst with guidelines for reflection on and selecting the power struggles that seem to demonstrate in a particularly clear way the struggles taking place in other locales and their relevance for the present. Many quantitively oriented social science scholars would most likely find that the issue of external validity is not dealt with sufficient rigour under the pointer of exemplarity. Conversely, some qualitative social science researchers fund of case studies, interview and observations studies do not see exemplarity and external validity as a problem. Some of them may even be provoked by having to reflect on the exemplarity of their study, not least by the request to specify the extent to and the conditions under which their findings are representative of wider social and political processes. We agree that exemplarity certainly do not provide a full answer as to how to ensure external validity in Foucauldian analyses, but it is a first step in carving out a distinct pointer different from quantitative as well as qualitative textbook approaches.

To conclude, it is our hope that the four pointers of methodological reflection can be useful to increase the validity of Foucauldian-inspired analyses without compromising on Foucault's critical ethos while, at the same time, providing responses to those seeking to place such analyses outside the realm of "proper" science.

References

Agamben G (1998) *Homo Sacer: Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press.

Arribas-Ayllon M and Walkerdine V (2008) Foucauldian discourse analysis. In Willig C and Stainton-Rogers W (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage, pp.91–107.

Bacchi C (2009) *Analysing Policy: What's the problem represented to be?* Frenchs Forest: Pearson Education.

Bastalich W (2009). Reading Foucault: Genealogy and Social Science Research Methodology and Ethics. *Sociological Research Online*, 14(2), pp. 81–90.

Becker, G, Evald, F and Harcourt B (2012) Becker on Ewald on Foucault on Becker American Neoliberalism and Michel Foucault's 1979 'Birth of Biopolitics' Lectures. Coase-Sandor Institute for Law & Economics Working Paper No. 614.

Brady M (2014) Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities: from the neoliberal apparatus to neoliberalism and governmental assemblages. *Foucault Studies*, (18), 11–33.

Butler J (1990) *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.

Cruikshank B (1999) *The Will to Empower. Democratic citizens and other subjects*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Darnton R (1968) *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Dean, M. (1994). *Critical and Effective Histories. Foucault's methods and historical sociology*. London: Routledge.

Deleuze G (1995) Postscript on Control Societies. In Deleuze G (ed), *Negotiations*. New York: University of Columbia Press, pp. 177–182.

Donzelot J (1979) *The Policing of Families*. New York: Pantheon.

Dreyfus HL and Rabinow P (1982) *Michel Foucault. Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*. London: The Harvester Press.

Elias N (2000) *The Civilizing Process. Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Escobar A (1995) *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Fairclough N (2003) *Analysing Discourse. Textual analysis for social research*. London: Routledge.

Ferguson J (1990) *The Anti-Poltics Machine. "Development", Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Flyvbjerg B (2001) *Making Social Science Matter*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foucault M (1967) *Madness and Civilization*. London: Routledge.

Foucault M (1973) *The Birth of the Clinic*. New York: Vintage Books.

Foucault M (1974) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Tavistock Publications.

Foucault M (1977a) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* London: Penguin.

Foucault M (1977b) Nietzsche, Genealogy, History. In Bouchard DF (ed), *Language, counter-memory, practice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp.139–164.

Foucault M (1982) The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(Summer), 777–795.

Foucault M (1987) *The Use of Pleasure. The history of sexuality, vol. 2. The history of sexuality ; v.2*. London: Penguin.

Foucault M (1988) *The Care of the Self. The History of Sexuality, vol. 3*. London: Penguin.

Foucault M (1991a) Questions of Method. In Burchell G, Gordon C and Miller P (eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp.73–86.

Foucault M (1991b) *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*. New York: Semiotext(e).

Foucault M (1997) The ethics of discomfort. In S. Lotringer (Ed.), *The politics of truth*. Semiotext(e), pp.73–86.

Foucault M (2000) So is it important to think? In JD. Faubion (Ed) *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1980*. New York: New Press, pp. 454-58.

Foucault M (2003) *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76*. London: Penguin.

Foucault M (2007) *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-78*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault M (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics - Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-79*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault M (2012). *Mal faire, dire vrai: Fonction de l'aveu en justice, Cours de Louvain, 1981*. Louvain-la-neuve: Presses Universitaires de Louvain.

Foucault M (2014) *On The Government of the Living – Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979–1980*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault M and Deleuze G (1977) Intellectuals and Power. A conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. In Bouchard DF (ed), *Language, counter-memory, practice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp.205–217.

Gergen, MM and Gergen, KG (2000) Qualitative Inquiry: Tensions And Transformations. In Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (eds) *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp.1025-1046.

Glynos J and Howarth D (2007) *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Goffman E (1961) *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. New York: Anchor Books.

Hacking I (1990) *The Taming of Chance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hill M (2009) Ways of seeing: using ethnography and Foucault's `toolkit' to view assessment practices differently. *Qualitative Research*, 9 (3), 309-330.

Jensen AF (2012) *The Project Society*. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.

Kearins K and Hooper K (2002) Genealogical method and analysis. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 15(5), 733–757.

Kendall G and Wickham G (1999) *Using Foucault's Methods*. London: Sage.

Koopman C (2013) *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kritzman L (1988) Power and sex: An interview with Michel Foucault. In: Kritzman, LD (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*. New York: Routledge.

Larsen LT (2011) Turning critique inside out: Foucault, Boltanski and Chiapello on the tactical displacement of critique and power. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 12: 37–55.

Lawlor L and Nale J (2015) *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lemke T (2007) An indigestible meal? Foucault, governmentality and state theory. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 8(2), 43-64.

McKinlay A and Starkey K (1998) *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory*. London: Sage.

Meriluoto T (2017) Turning experience into expertise: technologies of the self in Finnish participatory social policy. *Critical Policy Studies*, 0(0), 1–20.

Mitchell T (1988) *Colonising Egypt*. Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press.

Mirchandani, R (2005) Postmodernism and sociology: from the epistemological to the empirical. *Sociological Theory*, 23 (1), 86-115

Ojakangas, M (2005). Impossible dialogue on bio-power. Agamben and Foucault. *Foucault Studies*, *2*, 5–28.

O'Malley P, Weir L and Shearing C (1997) Governmentality, criticism and politics. *Economy and Society*, 26(4), 501–517.

Owen D (1995) Genealogy as exemplary critique: reflections on Foucault and the imagination of the political. *Economy and Society*, 24(4), 489–506.

Pacewicz, J (2020) What Can You Do With a Single Case? How to Think About Ethnographic Case Selection Like a Historical Sociologist. *Sociological Methods & Research*. URL: https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124119901213

Procacci G (1993) *Gouverner la misére: la question sociale en France (1789-1848)*. Paris: Seuil.

Revel J (2010) *Foucault, une pensée du discontinu*. Paris: Milles et une nuits.

Rose N (1996) *Inventing Our Selves*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Said E (1979) *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Scheurich JJ and McKenzie KB (2008). Foucault's Methodologies: Archaeology and Genealogy. In Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (eds), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitita*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Spivak GC (1988) Can the subaltern speak? In Nelson C and Grossberg L (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. London: Macmillan, pp. 24-28.

Staricco JI (2019) Reclaiming critique in social sciences – or why 'non-normative critique' constitutes a contradiction in terms. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 0(0), 1–19.

Townley B (1994) *Reframing Human Resource Management*. London: Sage.

Triantafillou P (2012) *New forms of governing. A Foucauldian inspired analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Triantafillou P (2017) *Neoliberal power and public management reforms*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Triantafillou P and Moreira A (2005) Modern templates of happiness: Performing spiritualism and psychotechnics in Denmark, *History of the Human Sciences*, 18 (2), 87-109

Venugopal R (2015) Neoliberalism as concept. *Economy and Society*, (April), 1–23.

Villadsen K (2006) Genealogi som metode - fornuftens tilblivelseshistorier. In Bjerg O and Villadsen K (eds), *Sociologiske metoder - fra teori til analyse i kvantitative og kvalitative studier*. Frederiksberg: Forlaget Samfundslitteratur.

Villadsen K (2020) Michel Foucault's Discourse Analysis. In Järvinen M and Mik-Meyer N (eds), *Qualitative Analysis: Eight Approaches for the Social Sciences*. Basingstoke: Sage. 283-304.

Vogelmann F (2017) Critique as a practice of prefigurative emancipation. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 18(2), 196-214.

Zamora D and Behrent M (eds, 2015) *Foucault and Neoliberalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.