

## **Some Epistemological Notes on the Qual-Quan division in Poverty Research**

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There are many hard-nosed scientific motives to conduct qualitative work when studying poverty in developing countries. Over and above these, people seem to feel either a near intuitive attraction or aversion to this type of work. This division into two camps may be due to more than just a disagreement on research tools. It may also be driven by some underlying epistemological disagreements reminiscent of debates held by psychologists about half a century ago.

Around the middle of the previous century a debate emerged in psychology between two camps. On the one hand there were the logical behaviourists, who believed that stimuli and response are all there is to reality. On the other hand there were the methodological behaviourists, who held the view that studying stimuli and response is the only way we will ever get a grip on reality, because anything else is unobserved, unmeasured and closed to any meaningful investigation.

Tom Nagel, a philosopher at New York University, did not agree with either of these camps. He believed that life could not be reduced to stimuli and responses to them.<sup>1</sup> In this critique of the behavioural approach to understanding the world, he took the example of a bat. We all know that bats perceive the world through sonar, sleep upside down and shun sunlight. But even a biologist who understood every detail of a bat's behaviour and physiology, would still have no clue about what it feels like to be a bat:

*“Our own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited. It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one's arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one's mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one's feet in an attic. In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task”*

Nagel's point is a metaphysical one: stimuli and responses can never, by themselves, make up a complete description of reality. They will never answer the 'what does it feel like?' question. Obviously it will be hard to know what it is like to be a bat, but is it even possible to know what it feels like to be another human being, even those people you live

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<sup>1</sup> Nagel, T., *The Philosophical Review* LXXXIII, 4 (October 1974): 435-50

with and interact with every day? Are not all ‘what does it feel like’ questions essentially private? Nagel argues they are not:

*“I am not adverting here to the alleged privacy of experience to its possessor. The point of view in question is not one accessible only to a single individual. Rather it is a type. It is often possible to take up a point of view other than one's own, so the comprehension of such facts is not limited to one's own case. There is a sense in which phenomenological facts are perfectly objective: one person can know or say of another what the quality of the other's experience is. They are subjective, however, in the sense that even this objective ascription of experience is possible only for someone sufficiently similar to the object of ascription to be able to adopt his point of view—to understand the ascription in the first person as well as in the third, so to speak.”*

Poverty research is often behavioural, attempting to explain people’s behaviour (responses) given their desires and environment (stimuli). The division into enthusiasts and antagonists of qualitative work, where not explained by methodological disagreements, may then be partly due to the fact that some feel that the numbers and statistics will never tell them the whole story. For them qualitative work manages to create a first person perspective to serve as a window on a part of reality that a *t*-test or a regression result will never be able to reveal. Sceptics object that either there is no other truth except stimuli and response; or even if there is, then any study of it will remain highly novelistic.

Qualitative work in the form of focus group discussions and life stories form, as Nagel would call them, first person accounts of the lives of people. Addressing the ‘what it feels like’ question is typically not the aim of the work. However, upon reading how people talk about events in their lives it is difficult to avoid it altogether. While it will never be possible to know exactly and completely what it feels like to be the respondent, at least certain *types* of experiences can be relatively objectively brought across: for example losing a child, feeling powerless in front of the local policeman, living in fear of a neighbour who threatens to burn down your house, or being proud about the modern house you were able to build through hard work on the farm.