

Running Head: KITCHEN STORIES MOVIE CRITIQUE AND RESPONSE

A critical review and analysis of the movie *Kitchen Stories*.

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Brief Synopsis of the Film

Kitchen Stories is set post-WW2. The beginning of the film shows a reenactment of a 1944 study in which scientists were investigating kitchen equipment usage and how the research could improve the working conditions for the ‘housewife.’ It appears from the onset that a systemic structure in which women fulfill the stereotypical ‘housewife’ role. The principal investigator was introduced as Dr. Ljungberg and the “Leader of the Swedish observers” was introduced as Mr. Malmberg.

Malmberg shows a map with lines indicating the movements of the Swedish ‘housewives’ over a six-week period. Thicker lines demonstrated often travelled pathways. The goal was to find ways to maximize efficiency of travel between kitchen appliances and spaces, while minimizing the length taken. In extending their research, the principal investigator wished to understand the same concept but, with the perspective of single males.

The character Folke was chosen to be the observer who views the participant, Isak. At the beginning, Folke was introduced to Isak’s home. It appeared that Isak chose to avoid Folke. The reason was not clear. Gradually, as Folke was allowed to enter the home, he starts to collect data. However, it appears that this was not an agreeable observation as Isak tended to minimize his presence in the kitchen. With time, the relationship between the two went from isolation to interaction—from acquaintance to what appears to be a platonic friendship.

Paradigm

Kuhn (2012) describes a paradigm to be an accepted example of scientific practice. Kuhn says, “[examples] include law, theory, application, and instrumentation together ... from which [models a] particular coherent tradition of scientific research” (p. 11). It appears that during this era, a positivistic paradigm was regarded as the principal choice for conducting research.

Zammito as cited by McGregor and Murnane (2010) showed that other ways of thinking, other than positivism, only occurred after the early 1960s.

Methodology and Methods

Often in scholarly research, the terms methodology and methods are often used interchangeably (McGregor & Murnane, 2010). These scholars say:

Methodology is a branch of knowledge that deals with the general principles or axioms of the generation of new knowledge. It refers to the rationale and the philosophical assumptions that underlie any natural, social or human science study, whether articulated or not. (p. 420)

Whereas, “methods are techniques and procedures followed to conduct research and are determined by the methodology” (p. 420). As stated in class, what follows a methodology is four axioms. They include ontology, epistemology, axiology and logic. To focus on *Kitchen Stories*, I chose to focus on epistemology.

Grix (2002) describes ontology “as the image of social reality upon which a theory is based” (p. 177). Grix also defines epistemology as being “concerned with the theory of knowledge, especially in regard to its methods, validation and the possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality, whatever it is understood to be” (p. 177). While the beginning of the movie does not explicitly outline the positivist epistemology, Folke confirms it later on. Positivism is based on quantitative methodology (McGregor & Murnane, 2010). These researchers say that positivism’s intent is to be able to explain and predict why. “Generally speaking, quantitative methods focus on the strict quantification of observations (data) and on careful control of empirical variables” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 128). Ontologically, in a positivist

lens, there is a dismissal of personal meanings or multiple realities—there is only one singular reality waiting to be discovered (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

In addressing Ponterotto’s point about “careful control of empirical variables” (p. 128), Malmberg outlines certain rules in which the observers must adhere to. The observer can come and go as they please. They must not interact with the participant, no matter how tempting it may be. The objectivist stance is one that is objective and bias free (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, strict adherence to non-interaction between the observer and the participant was paramount from the onset of the film. Any knowledge that is subjective, such as meanings and stories are dismissed.

Ethical Concerns

As someone who recently conducted research, I had three major ethical concerns. These ethical concerns fall under axiology lens. McGregor and Murnane describe axiology in terms of “fundamental values” (p. 420). Their examples include but, not limited to, “moral choices, ethics and normative judgments” (p. 420). The first major ethical concern was the method of collecting data. While positivism addresses the objectivist stance (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), Folke was positioned in the kitchen from a high-stool overlooking Isak’s movements. I interpreted Folke’s high-stool position as being an omnipotent being, having what Scott and Usher (1996) refer to as a ‘God’s eye-view.’

While there is strict adherence to no interaction between the observer and the participant, I put myself in Isak’s initial perspective. Someone who is standing over me, scribbling and writing my every action and movement would be unnerving. The simple act of Folke’s position may have an unintended impact on Isak’s movement and, as a result, an objectivist stance may be a utopian notion. This is evident with the mousetrap and sneeze incident.

While there may be a limitation to using a video recorder for the setting and time period for the film, there are many ways to reduce this ethical concern. As Merriam (2009) says, one needs to be “conscious of the ethical issues that pervade the research process and to examine his or her own philosophical orientations” (p. 235). Perhaps an agreeable discussion between participant and observer should have been made prior to the commencement of the research? Perhaps a peephole can be agreed upon to minimize the interaction? However, it is my belief that the direct presence of Folke in Isak’s kitchen may have violated this objectivist stance. Some literature have shown that it may be impossible to have a completely objective stance (Ercikan & Roth, 2006; Scott & Usher, 1996).

The second major concern I had was around a possible lack of informed consent between Isak and the principal investigator. In the movie, Isak is seen nursing a sick horse. Later, when Folke asks why Isak is involved in this study, he mentions that he was offered a horse for participating. It was not clear why, at the beginning of the film, a red toy horse is given to Isak. However, this over exaggeration of the term ‘horse’ violates the very essence of trust between participant and investigator and, as such, it is exploitive. Therefore, I believe the hesitation for Isak to receive Folke at the beginning was partially due to this loss of mutual trust.

The third major concern I had was around relational ethics. In today’s research practices, any research that involves human participants must go through a ‘Research Ethics Board’ (REB) review. This process is intended to minimize any unintended harm in relation to a participant’s involvement. Several instances occurred which made me question relational ethics.

Mr. Green was another research observer. Through a difficult conversation, Green confides in Folke about his struggle with being objective. As humans are social creatures, Green not having the ability to interact with his participant was an extremely challenging one. This

would be reflected in Folke's interaction with Isak. Grant, who appears to be a close friend of Isak also seems to be affected by this relational ethics. As Folke's relationship blossomed, Grant's standing with Isak appeared to be diminished. While this is likely to be unintended, Grant's decision to move the trailer onto the train tracks may have been motivated by Grant's diminished role in Isak's life.

Finally, when it was discovered that Folke had been interacting with Isak, he was told by Malmberg to immediately leave Isak. This very act may have been a catalyst to Isak's likely death at the end of the film, as a hearse is shown outside Isak's home and Isak missing at the end of the movie.

Conclusion

To be clear, I do not disagree with the use of positivism in this research study. But, based on the constructive arguments I have provided and, the design of the study, I believe there is no pure objective stance. If the study minimized the interactions between observer and participant through some of the suggested ways I have proposed, the study may be free of any unintended subjective interactions. Therefore, a close-to objectivistic stance may yield expected results. However, as Isak pointed out, no one asked him about why he moves in a particular way and the actions he takes in the kitchen. While positivism answers certain questions, reviewing one's axioms in relation to qualitative methodologies may answer other meaningful questions. In all, *Kitchen Stories* provides a very good setting for meaningful discussion around research practices.

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