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Chapter 9: Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research is a field of inquiry in its own right. It cuts across disciplines, subfields, and subject matter. A complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions surrounds the qualitative research orientation. These include the traditions associated with positivism, poststructuralism, and the many qualitative research perspectives or methods connected to cultural and interpretive studies.

In North America, qualitative research operates in a complex historical field that cross-cuts seven historical moments. These seven moments overlap and simultaneously operate in the present. They can be defined as the traditional (1900–1950), the modernist, or golden age (1950–1970), blurred genres (1970–1986), the crisis of representation (1986–1990) and postmodern, a period of experimental and new ethnographies (1990–1995), postexperimental inquiry (1995–2000), and the future, which is now (2000–). The future, the seventh moment, is concerned with moral discourse, with the development of a sacred texture. The seventh and eighth moments suggest that the social sciences and the humanities become sites for critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation, freedom, and community.

Successive waves of epistemological theorizing move across these moments. The traditional period is associated with the positivist, foundational paradigm. The modernist or golden age and blurred genres moments are connected to the appearance of postpositivist arguments. At the same time, a variety of new interpretive, qualitative perspectives were taken up, including hermeneutics, structuralism, semiotics, phenomenology, cultural studies, and feminism. In the blurred genres phase, the humanities became central resources for critical, interpretive theory and the qualitative
research project broadly conceived. The researcher became a *bricoleur*, learning how to borrow from many different disciplines.

The blurred genres phase produced the next stage, the crisis of representation. Here, researchers struggled with how to locate themselves and their subjects in reflexive texts. A kind of methodological diaspora took place, a two-way exodus. Humanists migrated to the social sciences, searching for new social theory and new ways to study popular culture and its local, ethnographic contexts. Social scientists turned to the humanities, hoping to learn how to do complex structural and poststructural readings of social texts. The line between a text and a context blurred. In the postmodern, experimental moment, researchers continued to move away from foundational and quasi-foundational criteria. Alternative evaluative criteria were sought, those that were evocative, moral, critical, and based on local understandings.

North Americans are not the only scholars struggling to create postcolonial, nonessentialist, feminist, dialogic performance texts, texts informed by the rhetorical, narrative turn in the human disciplines (Delamont, Coffey, and Atkinson 2000). This international work troubles the traditional distinctions between science, the humanities, rhetoric, literature, facts, and fiction. As Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) observe, this discourse recognizes “the literary antecedents of the ethnographic text, and affirms the essential dialectic” underlying these aesthetic and humanistic moves (p. 255).

Moreover, this literature is reflexively situated in a multiple, historical, and national context. It is clear that America’s history with qualitative inquiry cannot be generalized to the rest of the world (Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont 2001). Nor do all researchers embrace a politicized, cultural studies agenda that demands that interpretive texts advance issues surrounding social justice and racial equality.

Lopez (1998) observes that “there is a large-scale social movement of anti-colonialist discourse” (p. 226), and this movement is evident in the emergence of African American, Chicano, Native American, and Maori standpoint theories. These theories question the epistemologies of Western science that are used to validate knowledge about indigenous peoples. The Maori scholar Russell Bishop (1998) presents a participatory and participant perspective (Tillman 1998:221) that values an embodied and moral commitment to the research community one is working with. This research is
characterized by the absence of a need to be in control (Bishop 1998:203; Heshusius 1994). Such a commitment reflects a desire to be connected to and a part of the moral community. The goal is compassionate understanding (Heshusius 1994).

These understandings are only beginning to enter the literatures on social problems and deviance. As they do, a blurring of the spaces between the hyphens that join researchers and those studied occurs. Definitions of sociological phenomena, including social problems and deviance, are thereby made problematic.

Queering the Inquiry

In the context of discussing the study of same-sex experience, Kong, Mahoney, and Plummer (2002) present compelling historical evidence to support the conclusion that “the sensibilities of interviewing are altered with the changing social phenomena that constitute ‘the interviewee’” (p. 240, italics in original). Reviewing the interviewing of gays in North America and Europe over the past 100 years, they trace a movement from a “highly positivist mode of research through one where the boundaries become weaker, and on to a situation where interviewing has been partially deconstructed” (p. 240).

These authors distinguish three historical moments: (1) traditional, (2) modernizing, and (3) postmodern. Their analysis contrasts the three periods in terms of assumptions about interviewers, gays, lesbians, questions asked, approaches taken, wider cultural discourses, and politics. Interviewers are presumed to be objective and heterosexual in the traditional period, closeted in the modern period, and out in the postmodern moment. Same-sex experiences are approached clinically, in terms of pathologies in the traditional period, while they are normalized in the postmodern period, when discourses on disease give way to talk of liberation, politics, and postmodern ethics.

Kong et al. (2002:254) offer three conclusions relevant to the arguments presented in this chapter. Interviewing gays and lesbians today is very different from interviewing them at the end of the nineteenth century. With the arrival of postmodern understandings, new forms of interviewing and new kinds of findings are appearing. A form of reflexive, radical historicity should now be a part of all interpretive inquiry.
equal importance, any form of inquiry, such as the interview, is itself a cultural form, in which questions and answers become self-validating.

Reading History

Several conclusions can be drawn from this brief history, which is, like all histories, somewhat arbitrary. First, each of the earlier historical moments is still operating in the present, either as a legacy or as a set of practices that researchers continue to follow or argue against. The multiple, and fractured histories of qualitative research now make it possible for any given researcher to attach a project to a canonical text from any of the above-described historical moments. Multiple criteria of evaluation compete for attention in this field. Second, an embarrassment of choices now characterizes the field of qualitative research. There have never been so many paradigms, strategies of inquiry, or methods of analysis to draw upon and utilize. Third, we are in a moment of discovery and rediscovery, as new ways of looking, interpreting, arguing and writing are debated and discussed. Fourth, the qualitative research act can no longer be viewed from within a neutral or objective positivist perspective. Class, race, gender, and ethnicity shape the process of inquiry, making research a multicultural process.

Qualitative Research as a Process

Any definition of qualitative research must work within this complex historical field. Qualitative research means different things in each of these moments. Nonetheless, an initial, generic definition can be offered. Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret these things in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, and observational, historical, interactional, and visual
texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in an individual's life.

Three interconnected, generic activities define the qualitative research process. They go by a variety of different labels, including theory, method, and analysis, and ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Behind these last three terms stands the personal biography of the gendered researcher, who speaks from a particular class, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspective. The gendered, multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology), which are then examined (analysis, methodology) in specific ways. That is, empirical materials bearing on the question are collected and then analyzed and written about. Every researcher speaks from within a distinct interpretive community, which configures, in its special way, the multicultural, gendered components of the research act. This community has its own historical research traditions, which constitute a distinct point of view. This perspective leads the researcher to adopt particular views of the “other” who is studied. At the same time, the politics and the ethics of research must also be considered, for these concerns permeate every phase of the research process.

Resistances to Qualitative Studies

The academic and disciplinary resistances to qualitative research illustrate the politics embedded in this field of discourse. The challenges to qualitative research are many. Qualitative researchers are called journalists, or soft scientists. Their work is termed unscientific, or only exploratory, or entirely personal and full of bias. It is called criticism and not theory, or it is interpreted politically as a disguised version of Marxism or humanism (see Huber 1995; also Denzin 1997:258–61 for a review).

These resistances reflect an uneasy awareness that the traditions of qualitative research commit one to a critique of the positivist or postpositivist project. But the positivist resistance to qualitative research goes beyond the “everpresent desire to maintain a distinction between hard science and soft scholarship” (Carey 1989:99). The positive sciences (e.g., physics, chemistry, economics, and psychology) are often seen as the crowning achievements of Western civilization, and in their practices it
is assumed that “truth” can transcend opinion and personal bias (Carey 1989:99). Qualitative research is seen as an assault on this tradition, whose adherents often retreat into a “value-free objectivist science” (Carey 1989:104) model to defend their position. They seldom attempt to make explicit and critique the “moral and political commitments in their own contingent work” (Carey 1989:104).

Positivists further allege that the so-called new experimental qualitative researchers write fiction, not science, and they have no way of verifying their truth statements. Ethnographic poetry and fiction signal the death of empirical science, and there is little to be gained by attempting to engage in moral criticism. These critics presume a stable, unchanging reality that can be studied with the empirical methods of objective social science. The province of qualitative research, accordingly, is the world of lived experience, for this is where individual belief and action intersect with culture. Under this model, there is no preoccupation with discourse and method as material interpretive practices that constitute representation and description. Thus is the textual, narrative turn rejected by the positivist orientation.

The opposition to positive science by the postpositivists and the poststructuralists is seen, then, as an attack on reason and truth. At the same time, the attack by positive science on qualitative research is regarded as an attempt to legislate one version of truth over another.

**Politics and Reemergent Scientism**

The scientifically based research (SBR) movement initiated by the National Research Council (NRC) has created a new and hostile political environment for qualitative research. Connected to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, SBR embodies a reemergent scientism (Maxwell 2004), a positivist, evidence-based epistemology. Researchers are encouraged to employ “rigorous, systematic, and objective methodology to obtain reliable and valid knowledge” (Ryan and Hood 2004:80). The preferred methodology has well-defined causal models using independent and dependent variables. Causal models are examined in the context of randomized controlled experiments that allow replication and generalization (Ryan and Hood 2004:81).
Under this framework, qualitative research becomes suspect. There are no well-defined variables or casual models. Observations and measurements are not based on random assignment to experimental groups. Hard evidence is not generated by these methods. At best, case study, interview, and ethnographic methods offer descriptive materials that can be tested with experimental methods. The epistemologies of critical race, queer, postcolonial, feminist, and postmodern theories are rendered useless, relegated at best to the category of scholarship, not science (Ryan and Hood 2004:81; St. Pierre 2004:132).

Critics of the evidence movement are united on the following points. “Bush Science” (Lather 2004:19), and its experimental, evidence-based methodologies, represents a radical masculine backlash to the proliferation of qualitative inquiry methods over the last two decades (Lather 2004). The movement endorses a narrow view of science (Maxwell 2004), celebrating a “neoclassical experimentalism that is a throwback to the Campbell-Stanley era and its dogmatic adherence to an exclusive reliance on quantitative methods” (Howe 2004:42). There is “nostalgia for a simple and ordered universe of science that never was” (Popkewitz 2004:62). With its emphasis on only one form of scientific rigor, the NRC ignores the need and value of complex historical, contextual, and political criteria for evaluating inquiry (Bloch 2004).

Neoclassical experimentalists extol evidence-based “medical research as the model for educational research, particularly the random clinical trial” (Howe 2004:48). But the random clinical trial—dispensing a pill—is quite unlike “dispensing a curriculum” (Howe 2004:48), nor can the “effects” of the educational experiment be easily measured, unlike a “10-point reduction in diastolic blood pressure” (Howe 2004:48).

Qualitative researchers must learn to think outside the box of positivism and postpositivism as they critique the NRC and its methodological guidelines (Atkinson 2004). We must apply our critical imagination to the meaning of terms such as randomized design, causal model, policy studies, and public science (Cannella and Lincoln 2004; Weinstein 2004). Furthermore, we must resist conservative attempts to discredit qualitative inquiry by placing it back inside the box of positivism.
Mixed-Methods Experimentalism

Howe (2004) observes that the NRC finds a place for qualitative methods in mixed-methods experimental designs. In such designs, qualitative methods may be “employed either singly or in combination with quantitative methods, including the use of randomized experimental designs (p. 49). Mixed methods are direct descendants of classical experimentalism. They presume a methodological hierarchy, with quantitative methods at the top, relegating qualitative methods to “a largely auxiliary role in pursuit of the technocratic aim of accumulating knowledge of ‘what works’” (pp. 53–54).

The mixed-methods movement takes qualitative methods out of their natural home, which is within the critical, interpretive framework (Howe 2004:54; but see Teddlie and Tashakkori 2003:15). It divides inquiry into dichotomous categories, exploration versus confirmation. Qualitative work is assigned to the first category, quantitative research to the second (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2003:15). Like the classic experimental model, it excludes stakeholders from dialogue and active participation in the research process. This weakens its democratic and dialogical dimensions and reduces the likelihood that the previously silenced voices will be heard (Howe 2004:56–57).

Howe (2004) cautions that it is not just the “‘methodological fundamentalists’ who have bought into [this] approach. A sizeable number of rather influential…educational researchers …have also signed on. This might be a compromise to the current political climate; it might be a backlash against the perceived excesses of postmodernism; it might be both. It is an ominous development, whatever the explanation” (p. 57).

The Pragmatic Criticisms of Antifoundationalism

Seale et al. (2004:2) contest what they regard as the excesses of an antimethodological, “any thing goes,” romantic postmodernism that is associated with this project. They assert that too often the approach valued produces “low quality
qualitative research and research results that are quite stereotypical and close to common sense” (p. 2).

In contrast, Seale et al. (2004) propose a practice-based, pragmatic approach that places research practice at the center. Research involves an engagement “with a variety of things and people: research materials… social theories, philosophical debates, values, methods, tests… research participants” (p. 2). (Actually this approach is quite close to my own view of the *bricoleur* and bricolage.)

Seale et al.’s (2004) situated methodology rejects the antifoundational claim that there are only partial truths, that the dividing line between fact and fiction has broken down (p. 3). They believe that this dividing line has not collapsed, that we should not accept stories if they do not accord with the best available facts (p. 6). Oddly, these pragmatic procedural arguments reproduce a variant of the evidence-based model and its criticisms of poststructural, performative sensibilities.

I turn now to a brief discussion of the major differences between the qualitative and quantitative approaches to research.

**Qualitative Versus Quantitative Research**

*Qualitative* implies an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not rigorously examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. Proponents claim that their work is done from within a value-free framework.
Research Styles: Doing the Same Things Differently?

Of course, both qualitative and quantitative researchers “think they know something about society worth telling to others, and they use a variety of forms, media and means to communicate their ideas and findings” (Becker 1986:122). Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in five significant ways (Becker 1996). These points of difference turn on different ways of addressing the same set of issues.

1. Uses of Positivism and Postpositivism

First, both perspectives are shaped by the positivist and postpositivist traditions in the physical and social sciences. These two positive science traditions hold naive and critical realist positions concerning reality and its perception. In the positivist version, it is contended that there is a reality out there to be studied, captured, and understood, while the postpositivists argue that reality can never be fully apprehended, only approximated (Guba 1990:22). Postpositivism relies on multiple methods as a way of capturing as much of reality as possible. At the same time, emphasis is placed on the discovery and verification of theories. Traditional evaluation criteria such as internal and external validity are stressed, as is the use of qualitative procedures that lend themselves to structured (sometimes statistical) analysis.

Historically, qualitative research was defined within the positivist paradigm, where qualitative researchers attempted to do good positivist research with less rigorous methods and procedures. Some midcentury qualitative researchers (Becker et al. 1961) reported participant observation findings in terms of quasi-statistics. As recently as 1999, two leaders of the grounded theory approach to qualitative research attempted to modify the usual canons of good (positivistic) science to fit their own postpositivist conception of rigorous research (Strauss and Corbin 1999).

Flick (1998) usefully summarizes the differences between these two approaches to inquiry. He observes that the quantitative approach has been used for purposes of
isolating “causes and effects… operationalizing theoretical relations… [and] measuring and… quantifying phenomena… allowing the generalization of finding” (p. 3). But today, doubt is cast on such projects:

Rapid social change and the resulting diversification of life worlds are increasingly confronting social researchers with new social contexts and perspectives… traditional deductive methodologies… are failing… thus research is increasingly forced to make use of inductive strategies instead of starting from theories and testing them… knowledge and practice are studied as local knowledge and practice. (P. 2)

2. Acceptance of Postmodern Sensibilities

The use of quantitative, positivist methods and assumptions has been rejected by a new generation of qualitative researchers who are attached to poststructural, postmodern sensibilities. These researchers argue that positivist methods are but one way of telling a story about society or the social world. They may be no better or no worse than any other method; they just tell a different kind of story.

This tolerant view is not shared by everyone. Many members of the critical theory, constructivist, poststructural, and postmodern schools of thought reject positivist and postpositivist criteria when evaluating their own work. They see these criteria as irrelevant to their work and contend that it reproduces only a certain kind of science, a science that silences too many voices. These researchers seek alternative methods for evaluating their work, including verisimilitude, emotionality, personal responsibility, an ethic of caring, political praxis, multivoiced texts, and dialogues with subjects.

3. Capturing the Individual's Point of View

Both qualitative and quantitative researchers are concerned about the individual's point of view. However, qualitative investigators think they can get closer to the actor's perspective by detailed interviewing and observation. They argue that quantitative
researchers are seldom able to capture the subject's perspective because they have to rely on more remote, inferential empirical materials.

4. Examining the Constraints of Everyday Life

Qualitative researchers are more likely to confront and come up against the constraints of the everyday social world. They see this world in action and embed their findings in it. Quantitative researchers abstract from this world and seldom study it directly. They seek a nomothetic or etic science based on probabilities derived from the study of large numbers of randomly selected cases. These kinds of statements stand above and outside the constraints of everyday life. Qualitative researchers, on the other hand, are committed to an emic, ideographic, case-based position, which directs their attention to the specifics of particular cases.

5. Securing Rich Descriptions

Qualitative researchers believe that rich descriptions of the social world are valuable, while quantitative researchers, with their etic, nomothetic commitments, are less concerned with such detail. They are deliberately unconcerned with such descriptions because such detail interrupts the process of developing generalizations.

These five points of difference described above (uses of positivism and postmodernism, acceptance of postmodern sensibilities, capturing the individual's point of view, examining the constraints of everyday life, securing thick descriptions) reflect commitments to different styles of research, different epistemologies, and different forms of representation. Each work tradition is governed by a different set of genres, each has its own classics, its own preferred forms of representation, interpretation, and textual evaluation. Qualitative researchers use ethnographic prose, historical narratives, first-person accounts, still photographs, life history, fictionalized facts, and biographical and autobiographical materials, among others. [p. l-103 ↓ ] Quantitative
researchers use mathematical models, statistical tables, and graphs and usually write in an impersonal, third-person prose.

**Working the Hyphen: The “Other” as Research Subject**

From its turn-of-the-century birth in modern, interpretive form, qualitative research has been haunted by a double-faced ghost. On the one hand, qualitative researchers have assumed that qualified, competent observers could with objectivity, clarity, and precision report on their own observations of the social world, including the experiences of others. Second, researchers have held to the belief in a real subject or real individual who is present in the world and able, in some form, to report on his or her experiences. So armed, the researchers could blend their own observations with self-reports provided by subjects through interviews, life story, personal experience, and case study documents.

These two beliefs have led qualitative researchers across disciplines to seek a method that would allow them to record their own observations accurately while also uncovering the meanings their subjects brought to their life experiences. This method would rely on the subjective verbal and written expressions of meaning given by the individuals studied, these expressions being windows to the inner life of the person. Since Dilthey ([1900] 1976), this search for a method has led to a perennial focus in the human disciplines on qualitative, interpretive methods.

Recently, as noted above, this position and its beliefs have come under assault. Poststructuralists and postmodernists have contributed to the understanding that there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity. There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of the observer and the observed. Subjects, or individuals, are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts or stories about what they did and why. No single method can grasp the subtle variations in ongoing human experience. Consequently, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range
of interconnected interpretive methods, always seeking better ways to make more understandable the worlds of experience that have been studied.

Interpretive Paradigms

All qualitative researchers are philosophers in that “universal sense in which all human beings…are guided by highly abstract principles” (Bateson 1972:320). These principles combine beliefs about ontology (What kind of being is the human being? What is the nature of reality?), epistemology (What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?), and methodology (How do we know the world or gain knowledge of it?) (see Guba and Lincoln 2000). These beliefs shape how the qualitative researcher sees the world and acts in it. The researcher is “bound within a net of epistemological and ontological premises which—regardless of ultimate truth or falsity—become partially self-validating” (Bateson 1972:314).

The net that contains the researcher’s epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises may be termed a paradigm (Guba 1990:17) or interpretive framework, a “basic set of beliefs that guides action” (Guba 1990:17). All research is interpretive and guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied. These beliefs may be taken for granted, only assumed, while others are highly problematic and controversial. Each interpretive paradigm makes particular demands on the researcher, including the questions that are asked and the interpretations that are brought to them.

At the most general level, four major interpretive paradigms structure qualitative research: (1) positivist and postpositivist, (2) constructivist-interpretive, (3) critical (Marxist, emancipatory), and (4) feminist-poststructural. These four abstract paradigms become more complicated at the level of concrete specific interpretive communities. At this level, it is possible to identify not only the constructivist but also multiple versions of feminism (Afrocentric and poststructural), as well as specific ethnic, Marxist, and cultural studies paradigms.

The positivist and postpositive paradigms work from within a realist and critical realist ontology and objective epistemologies and rely on experimental, quasi-experimental,
survey, and rigorously defined qualitative methodologies. The constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and subject create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures. Findings are usually presented in terms of the criteria of grounded theory. Terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability replace the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity.

**Feminist, Ethnic, Marxist, Cultural Studies, and Queer Theory Models**

Critical theory is a materialist-realist ontology—that is, the real world makes a material difference in terms of race, class, and gender. Subjectivist epistemologies and naturalistic methodologies (usually ethnographies) are also employed. Empirical materials and theoretical arguments are evaluated in terms of their emancipatory implications. Criteria from gender and racial communities (e.g., African American) may be applied (emotionality and feeling, caring, personal accountability, dialogue).

Poststructural feminist theories emphasize problems with the social text, its logic, and its inability to ever fully represent the world of lived experience. Positivist and postpositivist criteria of evaluation are replaced by other terms, including the reflexive, multivoiced text that is grounded in the experiences of oppressed people.

The cultural studies and queer theory paradigms are multifocused, with many different strands drawing from Marxism, feminism, and the postmodern sensibility. There is a tension between humanistic cultural studies that stress lived experiences and a more structural cultural studies project that stresses the structural and material determinants (race, class, gender) of experience. The cultural studies and queer theory paradigms use methods strategi-cally—that is, as resources for understanding and for producing resistances to local structures of domination. Such scholars may do close textual readings and discourse analysis of cultural texts, as well as local ethnographies, open-ended interviewing, and participant observation. The focus is on how race, class, and gender are produced and enacted in historically specific situations.
Bridging the Historical Moments: Into the Present

Two theses have organized the discussion to this point. First, in its relationship to the field of sociological inquiry, the history of qualitative research is defined more by breaks and ruptures than by a clear, evolutionary, progressive movement from one stage to the next. These breaks and ruptures move in cycles and phases, so that which is passé today may be in vogue a decade from now. Just as the postmodern, for example, reacts to the modern, someday there may well be a neomodern phase that extols Malinowski and the Chicago School and finds the current poststructural, postmodern moment abhorrent.

The second assumption builds on the tensions that now define qualitative sociological inquiry. There is an elusive center to this contradictory, tension-riddled enterprise, which seems to be moving further and further away from grand narratives, and single, overarching ontological, epistemological, and methodological paradigms. This center lies in the humanistic commitment of the researcher to always study the world from the perspective of the interacting individual. From this simple commitment flow the liberal and radical politics of qualitative sociological research on social problems. Action, feminist, clinical, constructionist, ethnic, critical, and cultural studies researchers are all united on this point. They all share the belief that a politics of liberation must always begin with the perspective, desires, and dreams of those individuals and groups who have been oppressed by the larger ideological, economic, and political forces of a society or a historical moment.

This commitment defines an ever-present, but always shifting, center in the discourses of qualitative research. The center shifts and moves as new, previously oppressed, or silenced voices enter the discourse. Thus, for example, feminists and ethnic researchers have articulated their own relationship to the postpositivist and critical paradigms. These new articulations then refocus and redefine previous ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies, including positivism and postpositivism. These two theses suggest that only the broad outlines of the future can be predicted, as the field confronts and continues to define itself in the face of four fundamental issues.
The first and second issues are what we have called the crises of representation and legitimation. These two crises speak, respectively, to the other and its representations in our texts and to the authority we claim for our texts. Third, there is the continued emergence of a cacophony of voices speaking with varying agendas from specific gender, race, class, ethnic, and Third World perspectives.

Fourth, throughout its history, qualitative sociological research has been defined in terms of shifting scientific, moral, sacred, and religious discourses. Since the Enlightenment, science and religion have been separated, but only at the ideological level, for in practice religion and the sacred have constantly informed science and the scientific project. The divisions between these two systems of meaning are becoming more and more blurred. Critics increasingly see science from within a magical, shamanistic framework (Rosaldo 1989:219). Others are moving science away from its empiricist foundations and closer to a critical, interpretive project that stresses morals and moral standards of evaluation (Clough 1998:136–37).

Three understandings shape the present moment; these are,

- The qualitative sociological researcher is not an objective, authoritative, politically neutral observer standing outside and above the social world (Bruner 1993:1).
- The qualitative researcher is “historically positioned and locally situated [as] an all-too-human [observer] of the human condition” (Bruner 1993:1).
- Meaning is “radically plural, always open, and… there is politics in every account” (Bruner 1993:1).

The problems of representation and legitimation flow from these three understandings.

The Crisis of Representation

As indicated, this crisis asks the questions, “Who is the Other? Can we ever hope to speak authentically of the experience of the Other, or an Other? And if not, how do we create a social science that includes the Other?” The short answer to these questions is that we move to include the other in the larger research processes that have been
developed. For some, this means participatory or collaborative research and evaluation efforts. These activities can occur in a variety of institutional sites, including clinical, educational, and social welfare settings.

For other researchers, it means a form of liberatory investigation wherein the others are trained to engage in their own social and historical interrogative efforts and are then assisted in devising answers to questions of historical and contemporary oppression that are rooted in the values and cultural artifacts that characterize their communities.

For still other social scientists, it means becoming coauthors in narrative adventures. And for still others, it means constructing what are called “experimental,” or “messy,” texts where multiple voices speak, often in conflict, and where the reader is left to sort out which experiences speak to his or her personal life. For still others, it means presenting to the inquiry and policy community a series of autohistories, personal narratives, lived experiences, poetic representations, and sometimes fictive and/or fictional texts that allow the other to speak for himself or herself. The inquirer or evaluator becomes merely the connection between the field text, the research text, and the consuming community in making certain that such voices are heard. Sometimes, increasingly, it is the “institutionalized other” who speaks, especially as the other gains access to the knowledge-producing corridors of power and achieves entry into the particular group of elites known as intellectuals and academics or faculty.

The point is that both the other and more mainstream social scientists recognize that there is no such thing as unadulterated truth, that speaking from a faculty, an institution of higher education, or a corporate perspective automatically means that one speaks from a privileged and powerful vantage point, and that this vantage point is one to which many do not have access, by dint of either social station or education.

Judith Stacey (1988) speaks of the difficulties involved in representing the experiences of the other about whom texts are written. Writing from a feminist perspective, she argues that a major contradiction exists in this project, despite the desire to engage in egalitarian research characterized by authenticity, reciprocity, and trust. This is so because actual differences of power, knowledge, and structural mobility still exist in the researcher-subject relationship. The subject is always at grave risk of manipulation and
betrayal by the ethnographer (p. 23). In addition, there is the crucial fact that the final product is too often that of the researcher, no matter how much it has been modified or influenced by the subject. Thus, even when research is written from the perspective of the other, for example, women writing about women, the women doing the writing may “unwittingly preserve the dominant power relations that they explicitly aim to overcome” (Bruner 1993:23).

The Author's Place in the Text

The feminist solution clarifies the issue of the author’s place in the text. This problem is directly connected to the problem of representation. It is often phrased in terms of a false dichotomy—that is, “the extent to which the personal self should have a place in the scientific scholarly text” (Bruner 1993:2). This false division between the personal and the ethnographic self rests on the assumption that it is possible to write a text that does not bear the traces of its author. Of course, this is incorrect. All texts are personal statements.

The correct phrasing of this issue turns on the amount of the personal, subjective, poetic self that is in fact openly given in the text. Bruner (1993) phrases the problem this way: “The danger is putting the personal self so deeply back into the text that it completely dominates, so that the work becomes narcissistic and egotistical. No one advocates ethnographic self-indulgence” (p. 6). The goal is to openly return the author to the text in a way that does “not squeeze out the object of study” (p. 6).

There are many ways to openly return the author to the qualitative research text. Fictional narratives of the self may be written. Performance texts can be produced. Dramatic readings can be given. Field interviews can be transformed into poetic texts, and poetry, as well as short stories and plays, can be written. The author can engage in a dialogue with those studied. The author may write through a narrator, “directly as a character…or through multiple characters, or one character may speak in many voices, or the writer may come in and then go out of the [text]” (Bruner 1993:6).
The Crisis of Legitimation

It is clear that critical race theory, queer theory, and feminist arguments are moving farther and farther away from postpositivist models of validity and textual authority. This is the crisis of legitimization that follows the collapse of foundational epistemologies. This so-called crisis arose when anthropologists and other social scientists addressed the authority of the text. By the authority of the text, I refer to the claim any text makes to being accurate, true, and complete. That is, is a text faithful to the context and the individuals it is supposed to represent? Does the text have the right to assert that it is a report to the larger world that addresses not only the researcher's interests but also the interests of those who are studied?

This is not an illegitimate set of questions, and it affects all of us and the work that we do. And while many social scientists might enter the question from different angles, these twin crises are confronted by everyone.

Coping with the Present

A variety of new and old voices, critical theory, and feminist and ethnic scholars have also entered the present situation, offering solutions to the problems surrounding the crises of representation and legitimating. The move is toward pluralism, and many social scientists now recognize that no picture is ever complete, that what is needed is many perspectives, many voices, before we can achieve a deep understanding of social phenomena and before we can assert that a narrative is complete.

The modernist dream of a grand or master narrative is now a dead project. The postmodern era is defined, in part, by the belief that there is no single umbrella in the history of the world that might incorporate and represent fairly the dreams, aspirations, and experiences of all peoples.
Critical Theorists, Critical Pedagogy

The critical theorists from the Frankfurt to the Annales world systems and participatory action research schools continue to be a major presence in qualitative research, and they occupy a central place in social theory (Freire 1998; Kincheloe and McLaren 2000; Denzin 2003). The critique and concern of the critical theorists have been an effort to design a pedagogy of resistance within communities of differences. The pedagogy of resistance, of taking back “voice,” of reclaiming narrative for one's own rather than adapting to the narratives of a dominant majority, was most explicitly laid out by Paolo Freire (1998) working with adults in Brazil. Critical pedagogy seeks to overturn oppression and to achieve social justice through empowerment of the marginalized, the poor, the nameless, and the voiceless. This program is nothing less than the radical restructuring of society toward the ends of reclaiming historic cultural legacies, social justice, the redistribution of power, and the achievement of truly democratic societies.

Feminist Researchers

Poststructural feminists urge the abandonment of any distinction between empirical science and social criticism. That is, they seek a morally informed social criticism that is not committed to the traditional concerns or criteria of empirical science. This traditional science, they argue, rests a considerable amount of its authority on the ability to make public what has traditionally been understood to be private (Clough 1998:137; Olesen 2000; Lather 2004). Feminists dispute this distinction. They urge a social criticism that takes back from science the traditional authority to inscribe and create subjects within the boundaries and frameworks of an objective social science. Feminist philosophers question the scientific method's most basic premises, namely, the idea that scientific objectivity is possible.
Critical Race and Queer Theory Scholars

There is yet another group of concerned scholars determining the course of qualitative social problems research: They are critical race (Ladson-Billings 2000) and queer theory scholars (Kong et al. 2002), who examine the question of whether history has deliberately silenced, or misrepresented, them and their cultures.

This new generation of scholars, many of them persons of color, challenge both historical and contemporary social scientists on the accuracy, veracity, and authenticity of the latter’s work, contending that no picture can be considered final when the perspectives and narratives of so many are missing, distorted, or self-serving to dominant majority interests. The result of such challenges has been threefold:

(1) the reconsideration of the Western canon; (2) the increase in the number of historical and scientific works that recognize and reconstruct the perspectives of those whose perspectives have been previously written out of the present; and (3) an emphasis on life stories and case studies, stories that tell about lives lived under the conditions of racism and sexism.

Back to the Future

The press for a civic social science remains (Agger 2000). We want a civic sociology —by which we mean not just fieldwork located in sociology but rather an extended, enriched, cultivated social science embracing all the disciplines. Such a project characterizes a whole new generation of qualitative researchers: educationists, sociologists, political scientists, clinical practitioners in psychology and medicine, nurses, communications and media specialists, cultural studies workers, and researchers in a score of other assorted disciplines.

The moral imperatives of such work cannot be ignored. Not only do we have several generations of social science that have solved serious human problems, but many times, such work only worsened the plight of those studied. Beyond morality is something equally important: The mandates for such work come from our own sense
of the human community. A detached social science frequently serves only those with the means, the social designation, and the intellectual capital to remain detached. We face a choice, in the seventh and eighth moments, of declaring ourselves committed to detachment, or solidarity with the human community. We come to know each other and we come to exist meaningfully only in community. We have the opportunity to rejoin that community as its resident intellectuals and change agents.

And as we wait, we remember that our most powerful effects as storytellers come when we expose the cultural plots and the cultural practices that guide our writing hands. These practices and plots lead us to see coherence where there is none or to create meaning without an understanding of the broader structures that tell us to tell things in a particular way. Erasing the boundaries between self, other, and history, we seek to learn how to tell new stories, stories no longer contained within, or confined to, the tales of the past. And so we embark together on a new project, a [p. I-107 ↓] project with its own as yet not fully understood cultural plots and cultural practices.

And what remains, throughout, will be the steady, but always changing, commitment of all qualitative social problems researchers. The commitment, that is, to study human experience and its problems from the ground up, from the point of interacting individuals who together and alone make and live histories that have been handed down to them from the ghosts of the past.

Notes

1. Qualitative research has separate and distinguished histories in education, social work, communications, psychology, history, organizational studies, medical science, anthropology, and sociology. This chapter builds on and extends arguments in Denzin (1997, 2003), Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 2005), and Lincoln and Denzin (2000).

2. Definitions: structuralism: any system is made up of a set of oppositional categories embedded in language; semiotics: the science of signs or sign systems—a structuralist project; post-structuralism: language is an unstable system of referents, making it impossible to ever completely capture the meaning of an action, text, or intention; postmodernism: a contemporary sensibility, developing since World War II, that
privileges no single authority, method, or paradigm; hermeneutics: an approach to the analysis of texts that stresses how prior understandings and prejudices shape the interpretive process; phenomenology: a complex system of ideas associated with the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Alfred Schutz; cultural studies: a complex, interdisciplinary field that merges with critical theory, feminism, and poststructuralism.

3. This section draws on and reworks Denzin and Lincoln (2000:18–19).

4. Olesen (2000) identifies three strands of feminist research: mainstream empirical, standpoint and cultural studies, and poststructural, postmodern, placing Afrocentric and other models of color under the cultural studies and postmodern categories.

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Further Reading


Practice of Qualitative Research.” Pp. 1–29 in Handbook of Qualitative Research, 2d

Practice of Qualitative Research.” Pp. 1–42 in Handbook of Qualitative Research, 3d

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