

# Qualitative Inquiry: Tensions and Transformations

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The domain of qualitative inquiry offers some of the richest and most rewarding explorations available in contemporary social science. This bounty is the outcome of a host of historical convergences. The area has welcomed scores of scholars who have found their disciplinary traditions narrow and constraining. Despite potential peer criticism, they have entered the qualitative world brimming with energy. Other denizens have found outlets for expressing particular commitments or skills; here there is space for societal critique and political activism, just as there are clearings for literary, artistic and dramatic expressions. Further, scholars from diverse arenas -- AIDS researchers, market analysts, ethnographers and more -- have entered in search of ways to bring new vitality to their customary pursuits. Perhaps most significantly, the tidal wave of theoretical and metatheoretical debates sweeping across the intellectual world - variably indexed as post-foundational, post-structural, post-Enlightenment, and postmodern - has swept into the qualitative harbor. Here these turbulent interchanges have produced profound challenges to the ways in which the social sciences are understood and practiced.

As a result of these convergences the field of qualitative inquiry is replete with enthusiasm, creativity, intellectual ferment and action. As one researcher, Virginia Olesen, described it, "I don't think there's ever been a more exciting moment in terms of careful thought about the epistemologies of the methods, relations with participants, new modes and the growing strength of qualitative methods in important substantive fields such as education and nursing." (email, 11/25/98). There are cross-fertilizations, catalytic dialogues, and a prevailing sense of participation in a living revolution. Contrasting beliefs, skeptical challenges, and resistance are also in evidence. In the present chapter we turn our attention to some of these fractious cross-currents in order to highlight some of the more salient differences and to deliberate on possible futures. We do so, however, not with the aim of settling the disputes or of moving the field toward coherence or univocality. We do not view the doubts and disagreements as the birth pangs of a new methodological foundation, but rather, as opportunities for new conversations and new evolutions in practice. Approaching the issues from a social constructionist standpoint, we shall treat these tumultuous dialogues as harboring the generative potential from which the vitality of the qualitative domain will be carried into the new century.

We do not embark on this discussion alone. To assist us in our deliberations we surveyed contributors to the present volume and members of the Handbook's International Advisory Board. We asked them where they see themselves moving in the qualitative domain during the next five years, what kinds of projects they have underway, what particular turns of methodology seem especially inviting and exciting to them, and what modes of inquiry seem most appealing to their graduate students. The replies were most generous and enlightening; we wish to thank all

those who gave of their views for the enrichment of this chapter.

In what follows we shall attend specifically to three sites of controversy in qualitative inquiry: the crisis of validity; the rights of representation; and the place of the political in qualitative investigations. We shall follow this discussion with several provocations to future dialogue and development.

### **The Crisis of Validity**

One of the most catalytic influences on the qualitative domain has been the lively dialogue on the nature of language, and particularly the capacity of language to map or picture the world to which it refers. Developments in post-structural semiotics, literary theory, and rhetorical theory all challenge the pivotal assumption that scientific accounts can accurately and objectively represent the world as it is. At a minimum such work makes clear the impossibility of linguistic mimesis; there is no means of privileging any particular account on the grounds of its unique match to the world. The intelligibility of our accounts of the world derive not from the world itself, but from our immersion within a tradition of cultural practices. That is, we inherit from previous generations ways of communicating about the world. If our accounts conform to these conventions of intelligibility they will make sense; if they violate the traditions we cease our participation in the tradition. Thus, it is from our relationships within interpretive communities that our constructions of the world derive.

### **Deteriorating Foundations of Methodology**

This view of language leads to substantial skepticism concerning the epistemological foundations of scientific practices. The pursuit of universal or general laws; the capacity of science to produce accurate portrayals of its subject matter; the possibility of scientific progression toward objective truth; and the right to claims of scientific expertise are all undermined. We confront, then, what Denzin and Lincoln (1994) have called a crisis of validity. If there is no means of correctly matching word to world, then the warrant for scientific validity is lost, and researchers are left to question the role of methodology and criteria of evaluation. As Denzin and Lincoln cogently ask, "How are qualitative studies to be evaluated in the poststructural moment? (1994, pg.11).

Within the qualitative arena these developments have simultaneously stimulated heated debate and bursts of creative energy. For many qualitative researchers critiques of validity resonate with other longstanding misgivings about nomothetic methodologies for their inability to reflect the complexities of human experience and action. Indeed such researchers turn to qualitative methods in the hope of generating richer and more finely nuanced accounts of human action. Within these circles many argue that the empiricist emphasis on quantifiable behavior left out the crucial ingredient of human understanding, namely the private experiences of the agent. Both of these views -- that qualitative methods are more faithful to the social world than

quantitative ones and that individual human experiences are important - remain robust in today's qualitative community, with diverse proponents of grounded theory research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1994), phenomenology (Georgi, 1994; Moustakas, 1994), and feminist standpoint researchers (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Harding, 1986; 1991; Miller & Stiver, 1997) among them.

Yet, as the validity critiques have played out, they bite the hand of the qualitative enthusiast that feed it. If the idea of language as a picture or map of the real is rejected, then there is no rationale by which qualitative researchers can claim that their methods are superior to quantitative ones in terms of accuracy or sensitivity. A thousand word description is no more valid a "picture of the person" than a single score on a standardized test. By the same token, the validity critiques challenge the presumption that language can adequately map individual experience (Bohan, 1993; Butler, 1990). When a person gives an account of his/her experience, in what sense are the words a map or a picture of an inner world? Accounts of "experience" seem more adequately understood as the outcome of a particular textual/cultural history in which people learn to tell stories of their lives to themselves and others. Such narratives are embedded within the sense-making processes of historically and culturally situated communities (cf. Bruner, 1986; 1990; M. Gergen, 1992; in press; Morawski, 1994; & Sarbin, 1986).

### **Emerging Innovations in Methodology**

Although sometimes accused of no-exit nihilism, such skepticism has had enormous catalytic effects in the qualitative arena. An effulgent range of methodological innovation has resulted. Four of these innovations - reflexivity, multiple voicing, literary representation, and performance - deserve special attention. Their importance derives in part from the way in which they challenge the traditional binary between research and representation, that is, between acts of observing or "gathering data" and subsequent reports on this process. There is increasing recognition that because observation is inevitably saturated with interpretation, and research reports are essentially exercises in interpretation, then research and representation are inextricably entwined (Behar & Gordon, 1995; Gergen, Chrisler, & LoCicero, 1999; Visweswaran, 1994). Let us explore.

*Reflexivity.* Among the primary innovations have been those emphasizing reflexivity. Here investigators seek ways of demonstrating to their audiences their historical and geographic situatedness, their personal investments in the research, various biases they bring to the work, their surprises and "undoings" in the process of the research endeavor, the ways in which their choice of literary tropes lend rhetorical force to the research report, and/or the ways in which they have avoided or suppressed certain points of view (cf. Behar, 1996; Kiesinger, 1998). Rosanna Hertz elaborates on these implications for her work, "After delving into issues of voice and reflexivity, I find myself freer to think about how to incorporate my own voice into a piece of work where I have no personal experience. I want a reader to understand that... I bring to the topic my own history and perspective. I still believe that my primary obligation as

a social scientist is to tell the stories of the people I have studied. But I also find that the accounts they tell have been constructed through the dialogue that my respondents created in conjunction with me" (email 4/9/98).

Such forms of self-exposure have more recently led to the flourishing of autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). Here investigators explore in depth the ways in which their personal history saturates the ethnographic inquiry. However, rather than giving the reader pause to consider the biases, here the juxtaposition of self and subject matter is used to enrich the ethnographic report. The reader finds the subject/object binary deteriorating, and is informed of ways in which confronting the world from moment to moment is also confronting the self. In all these reflexive moves, the investigator relinquishes the "god's eye view" and reveals his/her work as historically, culturally, and personally situated. In the case of autoethnography the distinction between the research and the report or representation is also fully challenged. Personal investments in the observational act are not only recognized, but become a subject of the research. While a valuable addition to the vocabulary of inquiry, reflexive moves are not entirely successful in subverting the concept of validity. Ultimately the act of reflexivity asks the reader to accept itself as authentic, that is, as a conscientious effort to "tell the truth" about the making of the account. We are thus poised at the threshold of an infinite regress of reflections on reflection.

*Multiple Voicing.* A second significant means of disclaiming validity is to remove the single voice of omniscience and to relativize it by including multiple voices within the research report. There are many variations on this theme. For example, research subjects or clients may be invited to speak on their own behalf - to describe, express or interpret within the research report itself ( Anderson, 1997; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Reinhartz, 1992, in press ). In other cases the research may seek out respondents with wide-ranging perspectives on a given matter, and include the varying views without pressing them into coherence (Fox, 1996). Or, researchers may reflexively locate a range of conflicting interpretations that they find plausible and thereby avoid reaching a single, integrative conclusion (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997). Some researchers also work collectively with their subjects so that their conclusions do not eradicate minority views. Multiple voicing is especially promising in its capacity to recognize the problems of validity while simultaneously providing a potentially rich array of interpretations or perspectives (Hertz, 1996). Doubt gives way to the positive potentials of multiplicity.

Yet, multiple voicing is not without its complexities. One of the most difficult questions is how the author/researcher should treat his/her own voice. Should it simply be one among many, or should it have special privileges by virtue of professional training? There is also the question of identifying who the author and the participants truly are; once we realize the possibility of multiple voicing it also becomes evident that each individual participant is polyvocal. Which of these voices is speaking in the research and why; what is, at the same time, suppressed? The way in which Shulamit Reinhartz raises this question has significant implications for deliberating on this issue: "Using detailed field notes from a project I completed quite

a while ago, ... I trace the way I referred to myself during the course of the year, and saw how different parts of my self became relevant over time. I discuss these "selves" as emergent through the process of immersion in the field. At first, the most obvious "difference" with the [other group] members is what defines myself there. After that, more layers are unpeeled. As these different layers are uncovered, people get to know me in different ways, which leads to their telling me different things. This in turn allows me to know them in different ways over time.... Different lengths of time in the field therefore yield different types of knowledge. At first glance this seems self-evident because clearly a one-day visit is different from a one-year stay (for example). But this difference has not been explained or demonstrated. I think my notes demonstrate the process." (email, 4/18/98). Finally, moves toward multiplicity are not always successful in giving all sides their due. Typically the investigator serves as the ultimate author of the work (or the coordinator of the voices), and thus serves as the ultimate arbiter of inclusion, emphasis, and integration. These arts of literary rendering are often invisible to the reader.

*Literary Styling.* A third important reaction to validity critique is the deployment of stylized representation, and particularly the replacement of traditional realist discourse with forms of writing cast in opposition to "truth telling." For example, the investigator's descriptions may take the form of fiction, poetry, or autobiographical invention. The use of literary styling signals to the reader that the account does not function as a map of the world (and indeed, that the mapping metaphor is flawed), but as an interpretive activity addressed to a community of interlocutors. For many qualitative researchers, such writing is especially appealing because it offers a greater expressive range and an opportunity to reach audiences outside the academy (Diversi, 1998; Jones, 1998; Richardson, 1997, 1998; Rinehart, 1998) and to do significant political work (Behar and Gordon, 1995). While generating significant openings for creative expression, such writing is vulnerable to the criticism of singularity of voice. The lone author commands the discursive domain in full rhetorical regalia. Again, however, critique gives way to innovation: literary styling may be combined with other methodologies to offset the criticism. For example, in her dissertation on relationships among African Americans after the Million Man March, Deborah Austin co-constructed a narrative poem with one of the participants. This is a small excerpt:

Africans are the same  
wherever we are, she says to me  
matter-of-factly  
I look at her and smile  
and ask  
like a good researcher should  
How so?  
I can't explain, she says  
with that voice that sounds  
like the rush of many rivers.

(Austin, 1996, pp. 207-208).

Many of the issues brought forth about reflexivity and multiple voicings also can be directed at forms of non-traditional writing. While certain pitfalls of traditional literary forms are avoided in these innovations, claims that they are not appropriate for scientific representations are prevalent. These critiques are even more pronounced with regard to performance.

*Performance.* Finally, to remove the thrall of objectivity while sustaining voice, an increasing number of scholars are moving toward performance as a mode of research/representation. This move is justified by the notion that if the distinction between fact and fiction is largely a matter of textual tradition, as the validity critiques suggest, then forms of scientific writing are not the only mode of expression that might be employed. While visual aids such as film and photography have also been accepted as a means of "capturing reality," they have generally been viewed as auxiliary modes within written traditions. However, when we realize that the communicative medium itself has a formative effect on what we take to be the object of research, then the distinction between film as recording device as opposed to performance (e.g. "a film for an audience") is blurred (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). And with this blurring, investigators are invited into considering the entire range of communicative expression in the arts and entertainment world - graphic arts, video, drama, dance, magic, multimedia, and so on - as forms of research and presentation. Again, in moving toward performance the investigator avoids the mystifying claims of truth, and simultaneously expands the range of communities in which the work can stimulate dialogue.

Significant contributions to this developing form of research/representation include Carlson's *Performance, A critical introduction* (1996), Case, Brett, and Foster's edited volume (1995). Cruising the performative, as well as work by Blumenfelt-Jones (1995), Case (1997), Jipson & Paley (in press), Mienczakowski (1996), Conquergood (this volume), and Morris (1995). Specifically relevant to the qualitative domain Jim Scheurich, Gerardo Lopez and Miguel Lopez have developed a performance piece concerned with the lives of Mexican American migrants. The performance includes music, video, and a carousel of slides - all operating simultaneously. In addition there is a script that requires the participation of a cast along with members of the audience. As Scheurich notes, "The originators make no assumptions about the nature of these experiences or their relationship to Mexican American migrant life" (email, 4/19/98). In effect, the performance provides the audience with possibilities for a rich engagement with the issues, but leaves them free to interpret as they wish. In another format, Glenda Russell and Janis Bohan (1999) responded to the passage of Amendment 2 to the Colorado state Constitution (which removed legal recourse from those who encountered discrimination based on sexual orientation). Using themes and statements taken from the transcripts of interviews with those opposed to the legislation, the researchers helped to create two highly sophisticated and complex artistic projects, one a five-part oratorio, "Fire," written by a professional composer and sung by a highly skilled choir at a national competition and the other a

professionally produced television documentary aired on PBS. In their work one senses the blurring of many boundaries, between professional and amateur, insider and outsider, researcher and researched, and performer and audience.

### **Enrichment or Erosion?**

Judging from the reaction of our correspondents, investments in these ground breaking explorations are likely to increase. As John Frow put it, "Where do I go from here? I suspect into ever greater levels of suspicion of the protocols of intellectual discourse, and into exploration of the limits of the genre of 'academic' knowledge. ...the use of non-linear and recursive textual structures, seems to me increasingly unavoidable as I try to work my way out of the constraints and certainties of routine academic argument" (email 4/5/98). And, as Kathy Charmaz wrote, "One top priority for me is finishing a handbook about writing research. My approach combines methods of qualitative analysis with writing techniques ...that professional writers use" (email 5/30/98). Similarly, as Jim Scheurich commented, "I have turned to video in search of a... more multidimensional medium. I like adding visual and sound to written words. I also like the storying aspect tho I don't want to tell conventional stories. I see this medium as supportive of more levels of meaning" (email 4/19/1998).

Yet, in spite of the bold and creative zest accompanying many of these ventures, there is also a growing unease with the drift from conventional scientific standards. Epithets of excess -- narcissistic, overly personal, naval-gazing, exhibitionistic -- may be located. In this vein, George Marcus suggests that, "new thinking... and to some degree discursive practice in the things we write about reflexivity, subjectivity, power in intersubjectivity has run its course, nearly so, and that conditions of research -- especially of fieldwork -- need attention now" (email 4/4/98). Marcus argues that anthropologists must continue to engage in the long, hard work required to produce "thick descriptions," and not let other intellectual pursuits distract from that duty (Marcus, in press). Patricia Clough (1997) takes emotional charged autoethnographic writing to task for its symbiotic relationship with television drama and for "keeping theoretically motivated critical interventions at a distance" (p. 101). In a similar vein, William Tierney (personal communication) worries that too often "adventurous texts are little more than experiments with words. Those of us who are critics are increasingly skeptical of literary wordsmithing without any concern for change." The harshest words among those we surveyed came from David Silverman, who wrote, "The last two decades have been obsessed with fashions that will quickly be forgotten or integrated into other ways of working. The best of Post-Modernism (Foucault, Latour) will be incorporated into sober studies of institutional practices. The 'fun and games' (wordplays, experimental writing etc.) will be dismissed. [The] endless open-ended interviews will be understood as the Oprah Winfrey cop-out it really is" (email 4/3/98).

### **Emerging Challenges to Validity Claims**

One might view such critique as numbing in consequence, possibly functioning as an enervating backlash, a return to the conventional, and the end to methodological experiments. It could also fragment the field, as researchers may simply terminate dialogue and go their separate ways. However, such outcomes would be both unfortunate and unwarranted. At the outset, it would be intellectually irresponsible simply to return to business as usual - as if the validity critiques had never occurred. At the same time, those engaged in the new endeavors can scarcely declare that the validity critiques are fully justified. By their own account there are no foundational rationalities from which such warrants could be derived. Further, few of any persuasion would welcome a unified field of inquiry - guided by a coherent, conceptually rigid framework - in which all methods were prescribed in advance. Thus, rather than a domain of non-communicating, monadic tribes we may properly reinvolve the metaphor of generative tension. Placing these innovations and their critiques into an appreciative dialogue, what new avenues are now encouraged? What futures could be opened? Drawing from disparate dialogues, the following would appear prominent:

*Reframing Validity.* In the conventional terms by which it has been formulated, the debate on validity has reached an impasse. On the one hand those pursuing their work as if their descriptions and explanations were transparent reflections of their subject matter lack any rationale for this posture. Yet, those who find fault with this position are, in the end, without means of justifying their critique. In the very process of de-privileging they are relying on the self-same assumptions of language as correspondent with its object. Thus, rather than either reinstating the modernist tradition of objective truth, or opening the throttle to anything goes, discussion is invited into ways of reconceptualizing the issue. At a minimum, we might profitably revisit the issue of linguistic reference. If research or critique is "about" something, and this relationship is not one of mimesis, how can it be otherwise envisioned? Even those employing fictional genres or performance in their work do not treat their work as mere entertainment; the underlying presumption is that in some fashion it is a contribution to a understanding. Frow's communique offers an attractive beginning to the task of rethinking reference: "The concept of 'text' or 'discourse' refers to a matter which is ontologically heterogeneous: that is, which is not reducible either to \*language\* or to a reality which is external to the symbolic, but is rather a heterogeneous mix of language and other (e.g. iconic) symbolizations, of social relations, of built environments, of consolidated institutional structure, of roles and hierarchies of authority, of bodies, etc. It's only on this basis, I believe, that the metaphor of textuality or discursivity can work without being reductive either to language or to social relations." (email 4/5/98). Here we begin to consider the achievement of reference in far richer terms than heretofore. If reference is born of such heterogeneity, then we are positioned to reconsider the means by which validity is achieved, by whom, for whom, and under what conditions.

We might also abandon concern with validity, an option favored by not a few, including several reviewers of this chapter, who cautioned us to avoid the term, given its embattled history and predicted demise. However, a more promising direction for



us seemed to be toward reconceptualizing the concept. Here Patti Lather's work on validity (1991, 1993) is particularly catalytic. Lather proposes a "transgressive-list" of ways in which validity might be conceptualized: Ironic validity foregrounds the insufficiencies of language; paralogical validity is concerned with undecidables, limits, paradoxes, discontinuities, and complexities; rhizomatic validity, symbolized by the taproot metaphor, expresses how conventional procedures are undermined, and new locally determined norms of understanding are generated; and voluptuous validity - "excessive," "leaky," "risky," and "unbounded"- brings ethics and epistemology together. Robin McTaggart (1997) has also raised the interesting question of validity in relation to participatory action research. He suggests that the concept might be reconceptualized in terms of the efficacy of research in changing relevant social practices. "Our thinking about validity must engage much more than mere knowledge claims... [It must be] comprehensive enough to reflect [what] the social action researchers ... are committed to, by the trenchant and withering critiques of other more inert and detached forms of social enquiry." (pp. 17-18) Conversations around such viewpoints are rich in potential.

*Situated Knowledge.* Closely related to the revisioning of validity, but raising questions of its own, are explorations into situated knowledge. As Donna Haraway (1988) as well as other theorists have suggested, the concept typically serves an ameliorating function, reconciling constructionist and realist positions. Because few traditionalists wish to argue that their interpretations are uniquely articulated with the subject matter they wish to portray, and few constructionist would maintain that there is "nothing outside of text," a space is opened for situated truth, that is, "truth" located within particular communities at particular times, and used indexically to represent their condition (cf. Landrine, 1995). In this way we can commonly speak as if the term "sunset" maps the sinking sun in the evening sky, and astronomers can simultaneously agree that "the sun does not set." Descriptions and explanations can be valid so long as one does not mistake local conventions for universal truth. It is in this vein that Jim Holstein wrote positively of research that "tries to be mindful of the constructed, the ephemeral, the hyperreal, while not giving up on empirical analysis of lived experience in a world that still seems quite real and solid to its inhabitants (even if it doesn't seem as solid as it might once have felt.)" (email 4/23/98).

Yet, while a useful beginning, further dialogues on the conceptual possibilities are needed. We border on the banal if our only stance is that everything can be valid for someone, sometime, somewhere. Such a conclusion both closes off dialogue among diverse group and leads to the result that no one can speak about another. Such an outcome would spell the end of social science inquiry. Dialogue is invited, then, into how situated validity is achieved, maintained and subverted. Further, how do various qualitative methods function in this regard, and for whom? By what means do they variously achieve a sense of validity?

One important option is for the qualitative community to develop methods by which situated knowledges can be brought into productive (as opposed to annihilative) relationships with each other. Frequently many methods of inquiry support (or

"empower") particular groups. This outcome contributes to the situated knowledge of the group, but also tends to diminish alterior realities. The question, then, is how methods of inquiry could be used to generate productive exchanges at the border of competing or clashing "situations." There is a diversity of options to consider. One answer was provided by Yen Espiritu: "I am trying to think about how scholars of color can expand upon the premise of studying 'our own' by studying other 'others.' For example, as a Vietnam-born woman who studies Filipino Americans, I come to the research project not as an 'objective' outsider but as a fellow Asian immigrant who shares some of the life experiences of my respondents. I do not claim that these shared struggles grant me 'insider status' into the Filipino American community. But I do claim that these shared experiences enable me to bring to the work a comparative perspective that is implicit, intuitive, and informed by my own identities and positionalities. These implicitly comparative aspects are important because they permit us to highlight the different and differentiating functional forces of racialization" (email 4/12/98). Considerable attention is now being given throughout the discipline to transversing conversations (cf. Cooperrider & Dutton, 1998).

*Rhetorical/Political Deliberation.* Finally our contemporary debates would be enriched by extending the process of rhetorical/political deliberation. That is, we might usefully bracket the question of validity in favor of a range of alternative queries into the ways various methods/ representations function within the culture. Given the impact of social science pursuits on cultural life, how do we estimate the comparative value of various methodological/ representational forms? There is already an extensive sociopolitical critique of the patriarchal, colonialist, individualist, and hegemonic aspects of realism/objectivism (Braidotti, 1995; hooks, 1990; Penley & Ross, 1985; Said, 1978; Smith, in press). While such work represents an important opening, there has been little exploration of what many would consider the positive functions of the realist orientation - both politically and in terms of rhetorical potential. For example, the language of statistics is but one form of rhetoric; however, it is a symbollic that, for certain audiences and in certain circumstances, can be more compelling and more functional than a case study, poem, or autoethnographic report. More significantly, we have yet to explore the various sociopolitical and rhetorical implications of the new developments discussed above. For example, do ventures into the multi-voicing or fictional styling diminish or enhance audience interest or engagement? As Jay Gubrium, after expressing reservations about the work, declared: "The stuff can be riveting and, to me, that's important enough in its own right" (email 4/2/98). Yet in a society where clear, no-nonsense answers to serious issues are often demanded, such offerings may seem too impractical, irrelevant, or playful. As Linda Smirchich wrote: " I am located in a business school....and the dominant mode of thinking and researching is still positivist/quantitative/functionalist and directed toward managerial interests....I rarely get a daring student ", who will challenge these barriers of tradition. (email 4/23/98.) Either way, we must continue the inquiry into societal functions and repercussions of diverse modes of communicating.

In a different dimension, we might ask whether self-reflexivity and autoethnographic

reportage function in such a way that individual experience is privileged over social or communal renditions? Can these orientations be faulted for their contribution to an ideology of self-contained individualism? In sum, are broadscale comparative analyses needed of the various rhetorical/political assets and liabilities of the many emerging methodologies? Lincoln's (1995) analysis of the criteria for quality furnishes a significant beginning to this conversation (see also Garratt and Hodkinson, 1998).

## **Rights of Representation**

Critical reflection on the empiricist program has provoked a second roiling of the qualitative waters, in this case over issues of representation, its control, responsibilities, and ramifications. It is perhaps Foucault's (1979; 1980) disquisitions on power/knowledge that have figured most centrally in these critiques. For Foucault knowledge-generating disciplines - including the social sciences - function as sources of authority, and as their descriptions, explanations and diagnoses are disseminated through education and other practices they enlarge the potential realm of subjugation. For example, as the concept of mental disorders and the diagnostic categories of the psychiatric profession are recognized by all professionals and laypersons involved with such issues, so does the culture capitulate to the disciplining power of psychiatry. The implications of such arguments are sobering to the research community. Increasingly painful questions are confronted: To what extent does research convert the common sense, unscrutinized realities of the culture to disciplinary discourse; in what ways does research empower the discipline as opposed to those under study; when is the researcher exploiting his/her subjects for purposes of personal or institutional prestige; does research serve agencies of surveillance, increasing their capacities of control over the research subject?

Confrontation with such issues has been intensified by increasing resistance among those subjected to social science inquiry. Feminists were among the first to issue complaints, both for omissions and commissions in regard to characterizations of women in the research literature (Bohan, 1992). Minority group members have become increasingly aware that the longstanding critiques of the public media's distortion or misrepresentation of their lives apply no less to human science research. The psychiatric establishment was among the first professional group to be targeted, when it was forced by 1960s gay activists to withdraw homosexuality from the nosology of mental illness. It has also been the message delivered by African Americans angered by a social science literature depicting them as unintelligent or criminal. Similarly, the elderly, AIDS victims, "psychiatric survivors" and many others now join to question the rights of scientists to represent (appropriate) their experience, actions and/or traditions. Given the problems of validity discussed above, these various critiques have troubling implications for future research.

Yet, such contentions are not without their limitations. When extended to their extreme they are as problematic as that which they challenge. In reply to Foucauldian critiques, human science research often functions in counter-hegemonic ways,

bringing into critical focus the institutions of governance, economic control, educational institutions, the media, and so on. In this sense such research can function as a force of resistance and social justice. Further, to suspend all knowledge claims would be to terminate virtually all traditions - ethnic, religious, and otherwise - which depend on the capacity to "name the world." In addition, there are limits to the claims and critiques of interest groups as well. For one, claims to rights of self-representation exist along side a host of competing claims made by human scientists - including rights to freedom of speech, to speak the truth from one's own perspective, to contribute to science, and to pursue one's moral ends. Self-representation may be a good, but it is not the only good. Further, the concept of self-representation is not unproblematic. If pressed to its conclusion, no one would have the right to speak for or describe anyone else. One might even question the possibility of individuals representing themselves, for to do so would require that they appropriate the language of other persons. The solitary individual would have no private voice, a language of private experience. Without depending on the language of others intelligibility cannot be achieved. Broadening Methodological Vistas

With these cross-currents of opinion in motion, what is again required is a more tolerant and mutually reflective orientation to the research process. Consistent with the central theme of this chapter, we see these various tensions as generative in potential. They have already stimulated a range of significant developments and presently set agendas for a creative future. Let us consider three such developments garnered from the qualitative domain:

*Empowerment Research.* Perhaps the most obvious response to the critical concerns with representation, and one already well developed within the qualitative community, is empowerment research.. Here the researcher offers his/her skills and resources in order to assist groups to develop projects of mutual interest. Participatory action research is the most well developed genre of this kind (Brydon-Miller, 1997; Lykes, 1996; McTaggart & Kemmis, in press; Reason, 1994; Smythe, 1991 ). In one variation on the empowerment theme, Elijah Anderson (1978; 1990) has mounted research aimed at fostering connection among members of otherwise hostile communities. Anderson essentially "hung out" for many years in the public housing projects and on the streets of Philadelphia, creating focus groups and collecting extensive narratives from clusters of people frequenting street corners and other public places. His recent book, *Code of the Street*, (1999) is designed to speak to sociologists, but also to public policy planners, neighborhood groups, educators, and others involved with diverse client populations. While not abandoning an explanatory goal of making sense of "the code" of the street and its functions, Anderson develops an interpretive framework that has meaning for both marginalized and mainstream society, and thus functions as a bridge between them. The attempt is to reduce the mutual disrespect and sense of alienated difference that otherwise prevail.

*Conjoint Representation.* The use of conjoint representations to deal with issues of validity, as mentioned above, also has ramifications for issues of representation. As

researchers join participants in inquiry and writing, the line between researcher and subject is blurred, and control over representation increasingly shared. In early attempts of this sort research participants were given a broader space in which to "tell their own stories." Often, however, the researcher's hand subtly, but strongly, shaped the voice through editing and interpretation. To compensate, some researchers now ask participants to join in writing the research account itself. One of the most innovative and far-reaching examples of the genre is the Lather and Smithies' volume, *Troubling with Angels* (1997). Here the investigators worked in a support group composed of women with the AIDS virus. The report included the women's first hand accounts of their lives and what they wanted to share with the world about their conditions. Rather than obscuring their own positions, the investigators devoted special sections of the book to their own experiences and understandings. To compensate for the ways in which these various accounts were cut away from the discourses of medicine, economics, and media, the authors supplemented with more formal academic and scientific materials. Finally, the entire volume was submitted to the participants for their comments.

*Distributed Representation.* Representational critiques are also countered with emerging explorations into distributed representation, that is, attempts by the investigator to set in motion an array of different voices in dialogic relationship. A fascinating example is provided by Karen Fox (1996) who combines her own views, as researcher, with the related experiences of a survivor of child sexual abuse, along with the rarely available views of the abuser himself. The account is based on extensive open-ended interviews, and participant-observation in which Fox attended a therapy session with the convicted sex offender. The piece is arranged in three columns representing the three voices. The flow of the text encourages the reader to consider the three different perspectives - separately and in relationship. All of the words were those of the speakers. Although the selection and arrangement was Fox's, each of the participants had the opportunity to read and comment on all of the materials. Ultimately the arrangement facilitated a full expression of emotion - ambivalence, sorrow, rage, and affection. Fox also includes her own abuse story within the frame, thus breaking with the tradition of author insularity.

Another variation of distributed representation is offered by a group of three researchers, who are also the objects of their mutual study (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997). For five months the trio met in various configurations in diverse settings to discuss the topic of bulimia. Two of the researchers had long histories of eating disorders. The culmination of their research was a jointly written and edited account, in which they described a dinner at an elegant restaurant. This setting was very provocative for their particular involvements with food, and permitted complex relations to be treated as they wrote of ordering and eating food among others who are aware of one's "problems." The text of their combined efforts reveals the private reflections and active engagement of each within a single narrative. Unlike the presentation by Fox noted above, in which quotations were separated by blank spaces and individual perspectives were clearly delineated, this presentation is seamless. One achieves a form of "god's eye view" by discovering

almost simultaneously the private reactions of each author. For example, the reader discovers how ordering dessert take on momentous significance for each woman, and how they resolve their interpersonal dilemmas concerning this challenge. Such experiments in representation open new and exciting vistas.

### **The Place of the Political**

A third site of controversy is closely related to issues of validity and representation, but raises issues of a distinct nature. The focal point in this case concerns the political or valuational investments of the researcher. Thirty years ago it was commonly argued that rigorous methods of research were politically or valuationally neutral. Ideological interests might, or might not, determine the topic of research or the ways in which the results were used, but the methods should themselves be ideologically free. However, as the postmodern critiques of validity have become more sophisticated, it has become increasingly clear that there is no simple means of separating method from ideology. For one, methods acquire their meaning and significance within broader networks of meaning - metaphysical, epistemological, ontological - which are themselves wedded to ideological and ethical traditions. For example, to conduct psychological experiments on individuals presumes the centrality of individual mental functioning in the production of human affairs. Much the same privilege is granted by qualitative methods attempting to tap individual experience. In this way, both methods implicitly support an ideology of individualism. In the same way, methods that presume a separation of the researcher from the object of study (a subject/object binary), favor an instrumentalist attitude toward the world and a fundamental condition of alienation between the researcher and the researched.

This expanding realization of the political has had a significant impact on the posture of research. If inquiry is inevitably ideological, the major challenge is to pursue that research which most deeply expresses one's political and valuational investments. To paraphrase, "if science is politics by other means, then we should pursue that inquiry that most effectively achieves our ends." It is also within the qualitative domain, with its lack of a fixed metaphysics, ontology, or epistemology, that the politically invested are most at liberty to generate methods uniquely grafted to their political or valuational commitments (Crawford & Kimmel, 1999).

It is this realization of the political potentials of methodology that now leads to significant tension within the qualitative sphere. We confront a range of highly partisan but quite separate commitments - to feminism, Marxism, lesbian and gay activism, ethnic consciousness raising, and anti-colonialism, among them. Each group champions a particular vision of the good, and by implication, those not participating in the effort are less than good and possibly obstructionist. Many also wish to see qualitative research become fully identified with a particular political position. For example, as Denzin and Lincoln (1994) propose, "A poststructural social science project seeks its external grounding not in science...but rather in a commitment to a post-Marxism and a feminism...A good text is one that invokes

these commitments. A good text exposes how race, class, and gender work their ways in the concrete lives of interacting individuals" (p.579). For others, however, such cementing of the political agenda threatens to remove them from the dialogue. There are many whose humane concerns turn toward other groups - the aged, abused, ill, handicapped, and the like, and still others who find much to value in the longstanding traditions and use their research to enlighten policy makers, organizational leaders, and so on.

It is here, however, that the same logic inviting unabashed ideological commitment begins to turn reflexively and critically upon these very commitments. If the postmodern turn undermines validity claims, it simultaneously opens a space for political or valuational investments; however all reality posits serving to ground ideologically based research are simultaneously thrown into question. If one cannot legitimately claim truth through observational method, then accounts of poverty, marginality, oppression, and the like are similarly rendered rhetorical. Remove the rational and evidential foundations from empirical science and you simultaneously remove them from the sphere of value critique. And, as this form of critique has become progressively articulated, so has it produced a new range of tensions. The politically partisan turn on the postmodern arguments once favoring their causes to condemn them variously as "relativist," "conservative," and "irrelevant." (see for example, Reason, 1994).

### **From Partisanship to Polyvocality**

Given such conflicts over matters of political partisanship, we again find opportunity for expanding the potential of qualitative methodology. Perhaps the most promising development in this domain is in conceptual and methodological explorations of polyvocality. There is a pervasive tendency for scholars - at least in their public writings - to presume coherency of self. Informed by Enlightenment conceptions of the rational and morally informed mind, a premium is placed on coherence, integration, and clarity of purpose. The ideal scholar should know where he/she stands, and be responsible to his/her conception of the good. It is in this same sense that one may lay claim, for example, to "being a Marxist," or "a feminist," or "Grey Panther." Yet, as the postmodern literatures on "the death of self," social construction, dialogism and the like have made increasingly clear, the conception of the singular or unified self is both intellectually and politically problematic. There is much to be gained by suspending such an orientation in favor of polyvocality. Specifically, we are encouraged in this case to recognize both within ourselves as scholars and within those who join our research as participants, the multiplicity of competing and often contradictory values, political impulses, or conceptions of the good (Banister, 1999). We may each carry impulses toward Marxism, liberalism, anarchism and so on, along with potentials for those ideologies most antagonistic to them.

This view of polyvocal subjects offers a significant means of going beyond the political animosities pervading the qualitative arena. Feminist theorist, Rosie

Braidotti (1995) avails this end with her conception of "nomadic subjectivity." A nomadic consciousness "entails a total dissolution of the notion of a center and consequently of ordinary sites of authentic identities of any kind" (p. 5). Political theorist Chantal Mouffe (1993) suggests that a liberal socialist conception of citizenship "allows for the multiplicity of identities that constitute an individual" (pg. 84). As we see it, the presumption of polyvocality opens the door to new forms of research methodology. We have already touched on methods in which multiple voices are given entry into the interpretive arena - voices of the research participants, the scientific literature, the private views of the investigators, the media, and so on. However, the challenge of polyvocality is more radical in that we are sensitized to the possibility that all parties to the research may "contain multitudes." The question is whether researchers enable participating parties (and themselves) to give expression to their multiplicity - to the full complexity and range of contradictions that are typical of life in postindustrial society. There is movement in this direction (see for example, Jacobs, Munor, & Adams, 1995; Richardson, 1998; Travisano, 1998;) but we have scarcely crossed the threshold. Two pieces that work toward this end involve the practice of overwriting, in which the author allows each overlay of description to erase, revise, and change the identities and activities of all of the principle actors, including herself as stripper, dancer, wrestler, researcher and professor (Ronai, 1998; 1999). Performance pieces that cut between character expositions and reflexive commentary also serve to undermine univocal subject positions (Gergen, in press).

### **New Century Agendas**

Thus far the discussion has remained closely twined with debates currently sweeping across the qualitative divide, with a focus on propitious opportunities for further development. In this final section we wish to explore three issues fermenting at the margins - dialogues, movements, and sensitivities with promise of shaping the future of qualitative inquiry. Of focal interest are issues of relationship, the construction of the person, and technological vistas of research. Research as Relationship

As we find, the qualitative field has become a major source of creative innovation in modes of representation. Experiments in reflexivity, literary form, and multiple voicing, for example, have injected new vitality into the research endeavor. Yet, there is good reason to press further in such pursuits. Earlier we stressed the inextricable relationship between research and representation: any form of recording or describing is simultaneously a form of representation. At the same time, however, representation is inevitably "for an audience;" to write is to invite an audience into a particular form of relationship. At a minimum, the act of writing serves to position both self and reader, to give each an identity and a role within a relationship. In this sense every form of representation - like a move in a dance - favors certain forms of relationship while discouraging others. Thus, the various genres of social science writing - ranging from the mystical, and the democratic to the ludic - each favor differing forms of relationship (K.Gergen, 1997). More broadly, we may say that our forms of representation in social sciences are themselves invitations to particular forms of



cultural life.

In this context we are enjoined to pay critical attention to our existing forms of representation, and to consider future developments in methodology in terms of the kinds of relationships they favor. For example, much traditional writing tends to sustain structures of privilege: we write from the position of "knowing" to an audience positioned as "not knowing." The form tends toward the monological, inasmuch as the audience has no opportunity to participate, and the choice of vocabulary and sentence structure tends to insulate the writing from examination by the broader public. We have also seen how various literary experiments within the qualitative domain open new forms of relationship. The writer may abdicate the position of authority, for example, and invite the reader into a more egalitarian relationship. The significant challenge for the future is that of expanding forms of representation as a means of relational construction. With Michelle Fine, we might ask, "What elements of qualitative research are productively engaging toward democratic/revolutionary practices; toward community organizing; toward progressive social policy; toward democratizing public engagement with social critique?" (Personal communication). Further, if research constitutes a set of relations among researchers, participants, and audiences how can bridges of understanding be forged, and coordinations generated? There are important challenges here for the future.

### **Qualitative Research and Reconstructing the Subject**

Most qualitative methodologies are deeply infused with individualist conceptions and ideologies. To focus research on individual experience, desire, identity, suffering, or life story, for example, is to presume the primacy of the individual agent. To employ methodology that attempts to illuminate "the other" is already to favor a metaphysics of self/other difference. Similarly, forms of representation that favor hierarchy and monologue tend toward reifying the "knowing one." Even the recognition of authorship on the research report constructs a world of separate, self-contained individuals. At the same time, with the influx of postmodern, constructionist and dialogic formulations, we have become increasingly aware of the limitations - both conceptual and ideological - of the individualist tradition. Further, as many of the qualitative innovations begin to suggest, there are alternatives to this tradition. In our view, the most important of these alternatives might be termed relational. That is, to the extent that meaning is created within relationships, then relationship becomes a logical prior to individual minds. Individual selves are not prior to, or constitutive of relationships, but rather, a process of relatedness precedes the conception of individual minds.

Within this context, a major challenge for the future is the development of methods that generate a reality of relationship - not separation, isolation and competition, but integral connectivity. A significant move in this direction is represented in dialogic methodology, inquiry in which the outcome is determined not by a single individual, or by a plenary of separate voices, but within the dialogic process. In important

degree the primacy of relationship is implied in participatory action research. However, the possibilities are without limit. For example, Mary Gergen (in press) introduced the topic of menopause within a discussion group of eight women, as a means of counteracting the medical model and opening new spaces of meaning making. Through extended dialogue, the group was able to generate more positive visions of their development. In a similar vein, Frieda Haug and her students (1987; Crawford, et al) arranged situations in which women shared their stories of their emotional development. Through their mutual dialogues and interpretive sessions they were able to reconstruct their past, and to generate a sense of how the culture creates femininity. In these cases the dialogue was circumscribed to the researcher/participants. To extend the preceding concern with research as relationship, one can see the potentials for using research to generate dialogue that expands as it moves outward from the originary site. The goal of the research becomes one of inciting dialogue that may undergo continuous change as it moves through an extended network. This possibility gains substance in light of emerging technologies of communication.

### **Technological Revolution**

In his reply to our inquiries into the future, William G. Tierney essentially spoke for us: "I keep getting this sense that the way we do qualitative research over the next generation will change incredibly because of technology..." ( email 4/10/98). The vast share of qualitative inquiry is technologically unmediated and spatio-temporally circumscribed: the investigator speaks with the research participant(s) in a face-to-face setting or otherwise derives information in "real time" relations to objects of interest. However, with the enormous expansion of low cost communication technology - and especially computer mediated communication (CMC) - the limitations of traditional methodologies rapidly become apparent as vast stores of information are available at one's fingertips in minutes. Technologically mediated communication can be highly efficient, richly nuanced, and highly revealing; and its form transcends geographic and temporal barriers. These potentials open exciting new vistas for the researcher, and already there are numerous attempts to adapt traditional methods to the emerging context. Investigators engage in diverse research activities from far-flung regions of the globe (Markham, 1998; Miller & Gergen, 1998; Jones, 1998).

However, in our view these adaptations are only a beginning in what could become a major transformation in the nature of research, and indeed, the conception of knowledge itself. We are particularly struck by the changing relationship of research to temporal change. Traditional research methodologies are wedded to a conception of a relatively fixed subject matter. One may spend several years in studying a topic within a given population or sub-culture; in an additional several years the work may be published, with the hope that it will remain informative for the foreseeable future. The underlying presumption is that the focus of the research remains relatively stable, and will continue to be so. Yet, with the global proliferation of communication technologies, so are processes of meaning making accelerated. Values, attitudes, and

opinions are all subject to rapid fluctuation, and with them patterns of related action are changed. In effect, the temporal relevance of a research study is increasingly delimited, the half-life of cultural analysis increasingly shortened. The question, then, is whether the traditional methods of research and representation are slowly becoming irrelevant to issues of social deliberation. Further, can we begin to consider research not as a scopic "search," but as an active insinuation into social life? Given our previous discussion of research as politics, such a possibility seems attractive, if precarious. Rather than reflecting on issues from an increasingly distant past, could we employ research to create dialogues on the future, replete with new associations and alliances, and innovative openings for action?

To illustrate the possibilities consider research that explores realities not yet in existence. Investigators join in generating virtual worlds - for example, configurations of meaning, structures of relationship, or mini-utopias - in which people may participate. Through their participation they learn of the potentials of such worlds, and such knowledge can be used to refashion existing institutions. This line of reasoning has guided the inquiry of Dutch Public Administration scholar, Paul Frissen, who works with a team of scholars and policy makers to explore the governmental policy implications of CMC. Recognizing the rapid transformation taking place in the internet world, Frissen and his colleagues have established a virtual community existing beyond the law of any particular nation. Without any public mandate, this community generates its own "laws" of internet communication. Governmental officials are then invited into this world to speak with participants, sample the powers of the network, and explore its potentials as they are unfolding at that very moment. It is through this immersion in this world - virtual yet potentially palpable in consequence - that both participants and observers alike acquire an enriched sense of potential effects. The administrators learn about the limits of government intervention in the world of CMC. In the future we imagine a time when researchers might build virtual spaces for crossing borders of contention, experimenting with new political formations, or creating self-organizing learning centers. At this point one can scarcely imagine the horizons.

While computers are the most dramatic of the technological inventions to attract our attentions in recent years, the powerful effects of television have also been considered. As television viewing becomes increasingly a backdrop of everyday life in most dwellings, it also becomes a vital shaper of writing and representational practices and of audience responses. This connection has lead Patricia Clough, in writing about the links between Carolyn Ellis's autoethnography, *Final Negotiations*, and the melodramatic, talk-show explicit, emotional realism of television, to speculate about how sociology can expand and alter its own course of study. "Sociologists must increasingly take up sociology's relationship to the extension of telecommunication in the late twentieth century. Sociologists must reflexively treat the forms of address and enunciation of the mass media in order to elaborate an understanding of readers' vulnerabilities to them....It ... means rethinking notions of memory, time, space, body and affects in relation to sociological methodology, especially in relation to the meaning of reliability and validity." (199, pg. 108). Given

the multiple intruding effects of diverse technologies on our lives, as private citizens and as researchers, our forms of life are bound to be radically influenced and continuously under construction.

## **Conclusion**

In their introduction to the 1994 edition of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Denzin and Lincoln averred that, "We are in a new age where messy, uncertain, multivoiced texts, cultural criticisms, and new experimental works will become more common" (p. 15). At the same time they suggested that "the field of qualitative research is defined by a series of tensions, contradictions, and hesitations." (p. 15) This analysis lends strong support to their prognostications. Along with the critique and experimentation, the tensions, contradictions and hesitations they mentioned are present, but, in our view, they are scarcely signs of deterioration. Rather, it is from within this matrix of uncertainty - where we are unceasingly crossing the boundaries of established enclaves - appropriating, reflecting, creating - that the vitality of qualitative inquiry is drawn. It is here that we locate the innovative power that is transforming the face of the social sciences. If we can avoid impulses toward elimination, the rage to order, and the desire for unity and singularity, we can anticipate a continuing flourishing of qualitative research endeavors, full of serendipitous incidents and generative expansions. With all of these fireworks, cause for celebration is almost sure to follow.

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Qualitative inquiry: Tensions and transformations. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 1025–1046). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. [Google Scholar](#). *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1, 95–105. [CrossRef](#) [Google Scholar](#). Hollway, W. (1989). *Subjectivity and method in psychology: Gender, meaning, and science*. *Qualitative Inquiry* is a peer-reviewed academic journal that covers methodological issues raised by qualitative research in the social sciences. The journal's editors-in-chief are Yvonna Lincoln (Texas A&M University) and Norman K. Denzin (University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign). It was established in 1995 and is currently published by SAGE Publications. Most recently, I read the special issue on PQR in *Qualitative Inquiry*, which includes brief invited commentaries outlining innovations, tensions, and generative questions (Lee Carlson et al., 2020). This special issue reinvigorated my curiosity. ... In this article, we explore transformative interviewing through the lens of new materialism. Rather than viewing transformation through a humanist perspective that centralizes a transcendent self, we draw upon Barad's agential realism to reconsider transformation following the ontological turn.