

The First International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry
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The First International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry will take place on the campus of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign on the dates of May 5-7, 2005. The three-day conference begins with a full day of workshops on 5 May. The editors have graciously invited me to describe the Congress and what I and others see as the intent for its convening. This is an opportunity too discuss the ideas and controversies that led to this Congress.

The theme of the First International Congress focuses On "Qualitative Inquiry in a Time of Global Uncertainty." We call on the international community of interpretive scholars to gather together in common purpose. We seek to address the implications of the recent attempts by federal governments and their agencies to define what is good science, what is good scholarship.

Around the globe governments are attempting to regulate interpretive inquiry by enforcing biomedical, evidence-based models of research. These regulatory activities raise basic philosophical, epistemological, political and pedagogical issues for scholarship and freedom of speech in the academy. Their effects are interdisciplinary. They cut across the fields of educational and policy research, the humanities, communications, health and social science, social welfare, business and law. This legislation marginalizes indigenous, border, feminist, race, queer, and ethnic studies.

Qualitative Inquiry as a Reformist Movement

Qualitative inquiry is the name for a "reformist movement that began in the early 1970s in the academy" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 189). The interpretive and critical paradigms, in their multiple forms, are central to this movement. Indeed, this movement encompasses multiple paradigmatic formulations. It also includes complex epistemological and ethical criticisms of traditional social science research. The movement now has its own journals, scientific associations, conferences, annual workshops, and faculty positions.

The transformations in the field of qualitative research that were taking place in the early 1990s continued to gain momentum as the decade unfolded. The days of value-free inquiry based on a God's eye view of reality are judged by many to be over. Today many agree that all inquiry is moral and political. By century's end few looked back with skepticism on the narrative turn. Today we know that men and women write culture differently, and writing itself is not an innocent practice.

Experimental, reflexive ways of writing first-person ethnographic texts are now commonplace. Critical personal narratives have become a central feature of counter-hegemonic, decolonizing methodologies (Mutua and Swadener, 2004, p. 16). Sociologists, anthropologists and educators continue to explore new ways of composing ethnography, writing fiction, drama, performance tests and ethnographic poetry. Social science journals are holding fiction contests. Civic journalism is shaping calls for a civic, or public ethnography, and cultural criticism is now accepted practice.

Not surprisingly, however, this quiet revolution has been met by resistance. The field of qualitative research is defined primarily by a series of essential tensions, contradictions and hesitations. These tensions -- many of them emerging in the last decade-- work back and forth between competing definitions and conceptions of the field. These tensions are lodged within and outside the field.

Politics, Scientism and Methodological Fundamentalism

In the U. S., primary external resistance grows out of neo-conservative discourses, and the recent National Research Council (NRC) report (see Feuer, Towne, and Shavelson, 2002) which have appropriated neo-positivist, evidence-based epistemologies. Leaders of this movement assert that qualitative research is non-scientific, should not receive federal funds, and is of little value in the social policy arena (see Lincoln and Cannella, 2004).

The methodological conservatism embedded in the educational initiatives of the Bush Administration have inscribed narrowly defined governmental regimes of truth. The new "gold standard" for producing knowledge that is worthwhile having is based on quantitative, experimental design studies (Lincoln and Canella, 2004, p. 7).

This methodological fundamentalism (Lincoln and Cannella, 2004, p. 7) returns to a much discredited model of empirical inquiry. The experimental quantitative model is ill-suited to "examining the complex and dynamic contexts of public education in its many forms, sites, and variations, especially considering the ... subtle social difference produced by gender, race, ethnicity, linguistic status or class. Indeed, multiple kinds of knowledge, produced by multiple epistemologies and methodologies, are not only worth having but also demanded if policy, legislation and practice are to be sensitive to social needs" (Lincoln and Cannella, 2004, p. 7).

The scientifically based research movement (SBR) 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 (NCLB), 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, p. 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 which allow replication, and generalization (Ryan and Hood, 2004, p. 81).

Under this framework, qualitative research becomes suspect. There are no well-defined variables, or causal 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, p. 81; St. Pierre, 2004, p. 132).

Critics of the evidence movement are united on the following points. "Bush Science" (Lather, 2004, p. 19), and its experimental, evidence-based methodologies represents a racialized masculinist 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 [1963] era and its dogmatic adherence to an exclusive reliance on quantitative methods" (Howe, 2004, p. 42). There is a "nostalgia for a simple and ordered universe of science that never was" (Popkewitz, 2004, p. 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, p. 48). But the random clinical trial--dispensing a pill--is quite unlike "dispensing a curriculum" (Howe, 2004, p. 48), nor can the 'effects' of the educational experiment be easily measured, unlike a "10-point reduction in diastolic blood pressure" (Howe, 2004, p. 48).

Qualitative researchers must learn to think outside the box, as they critique the NRC and its methodological guidelines (Atkinson, 2004). We must apply our critical imaginations to the meaning of such terms as randomized design, causal model, policy studies and public science (Weinstein, 2004). More deeply

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 randomized experimental designs (Howe, 2004, 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'" (Howe, 2004, pp. 53-54).

The mix-methods movement takes qualitative methods out of their natural home, which is within the critical, interpretive framework (Howe, 2004, p. 54; but see Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003, p. 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, p. 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 decreases the likelihood the previously silenced voices will be heard (Howe, 2004, pp. 56-57).

Howe 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" (2004, p. 57).

Pragmatic Criticisms of Qualitative Inquiry

Writing as pragmatists, Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, and Silverman (2004, p.2) contest what they regard as the excesses of an anti-methodological, "any thing goes", romantic postmodernism that is associated with the more radical, poststructural branches of the qualitative inquiry movement. They assert that too often this approach produces "low quality qualitative research and research results that are quite stereotypical and close to common sense (2004, p. 2).

To counter these effects they propose a practice-based, pragmatic approach and a situated methodology that rejects the anti-foundational 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. They are used by critics to provide additional support for the methodological marginalization of these sensibilities and practices.

CONCLUSION

In the United States, and around the globe, the evidence-based experimental science movement, with accompanying federal legislation threatens to deny advances in critical qualitative inquiry, including rigorous criticisms of positivist research. The international community of qualitative researchers must come together to debate and discuss the implications of these recent developments.

The mission of the First International Congress is to provide a forum for these critical conversations. We seek to generate lively, critical debate, foster contacts and the exchange ideas and draw inspiration from each other. We encourage international participation from different countries, disciplines and cultural backgrounds, as well as from a wide range of research areas, including the humanities, the social sciences, communications, social work, medical, and health care scholars.

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