

Current Issues in Three Social Research Traditions:

Quantitative, Qualitative, and Action

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Before describing issues in each of these three research traditions – Quantitative, Qualitative, and Action – I want to provide an overview of the important issues in the social science more generally – this being the overarching discipline in which the research traditions are contained, and for which their knowledge creation is generated. Thus issues in the various social research traditions will be reflections or indications of issues in the greater social science.

“One proposition that would be uncontroversial...is that the philosophy of social science has depended on developments in the philosophy of science. Each philosophy of science sets narrow limits for what is acceptable as a philosophy of social science. Yet a philosophy of social science is formulated normally after the main ideas of the parent philosophy of science have been exhaustively studied...*The philosophy of social science, then, typically has the fate of being behind the times and on the point of change*” (Thomas, p.1, emphasis added).

This rather paternalistic sounding author is describing relationships between ‘natural’ science and ‘social’ science, and is touching upon a core fundamental concern: “Can social study conform to a *naturalistic* methodology, that is replicate the methodology of natural science” (ibid)? Good question; but what exactly is this preeminent “methodology of natural science?” – where methodology is understood here as “discourse on method” (Johnson, p.2).

“Since the 17th century, the modern scientific project has emerged as a *very particular method* of understanding nature: scientists are trained to discover how things work or why things happen but not what is good or bad. Philosophers call this value-free science” (Masters, p.4, emphasis added).

The purpose of making science “value-free” was to purge the ‘contaminants’ of human emotion, opinion, and predilection from the search for ‘truth.’ Truth – true knowledge – was to be found in the accuracy of representations of an objective world ‘out there;’ and the mind best able to perceive, communicate, and ultimately *utilize* these truths was as an “unclouded and undistorting Mirror of Nature” (Rorty, p.248). ‘Scientific’ knowledge was made absolutely distinct from ‘common’ knowledge, and was deemed to be far superior at describing reality. Masters continues:

“A gulf between the *Is* and the *Ought* – called the fact-value dichotomy – is said to prevent the scientist, who studies questions of fact, from addressing *social or personal values* as scientific questions... Such a self-limiting restraint on science seemed to be the condition of replacing arid theological or speculative controversies with rigorous theories and empirical verifications” (p.4, emphasis added).

“Rigorous theories” and “empirical verifications” – these were the stuff of the natural science, and behind their usage was the unquestioned belief that there could be found a firm, unshakeable, absolutely certain “Archimedean point... a solid edifice of knowledge,” and that this knowledge would reveal itself “by following strict rules and Method” (Bernstein, p.117). In other quarters this so-called ‘empirical’ agenda has been called the **positivist** project:¹

“[P]ositivism – the adoption of a rather limited notion of the scientific method as not only a prescription for conducting research and producing scientific knowledge but a comprehensive worldview, social ideology, and definition of the meaning of life – is an important force in the history of modern culture and, in particular, in the history of intellectual life and research” (Bentz and Schapiro, pp.26-7).

As an illustration of their assertion, these authors go on to list key positivist theses and beliefs (pp.27-8), including:

¹ The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines ‘empirical’ as: “1. Relying upon or derived from observation or experiment...2. Guided by practical experience and not theory...” I point this out now because later in this essay it will be revealed that there is some confusion about the usage of this term.

- 1) The modern “positive,” empirical, factual sciences are the only legitimate form of knowledge, replacing religion, metaphysics, and philosophical speculation as valid knowledge. Science is its own justification and requires no philosophical justification or validation.
- 2) There is, or should be, a unitary form for science, with the implication that there is a single, canonical model, that particular disciplines are more or less scientific and more or less “mature” to the extent that they conform to this model, and that ultimately they will all converge in a “unified science.”
- 3) The world and knowledge are structured *atomistically*. That is, reality consists of a collection of disconnected facts, and experience consists of a bunch of disconnected perceptions or observations.
- 4) Ethics, values, and politics have no rational basis, on the grounds that they are not scientific. Rationality can exist only in the realm of science and not in the ethical or practical realm, which is seen as the expression of irrational or nonrational emotion, will, instinct, or arbitrary decision making.
- 5) Human and social progress are interpreted in terms of scientific progress ...And, because [positivism] tends to think of science in terms of prediction and control, it tends to think of human and social improvement or change in terms of “social engineering.”

This **positivism** was what I would call a ‘mechanistic’ agenda, the consequence of a worldview that regarded the universe as a ‘machine,’ where the objective scientists’ reductionist project was to identify, analyze, and catalogue all the various parts of the machine. Of course, machines are lifeless, soulless, and as a result of the second law of thermodynamics, *they’re always running down*.

Wilber likes to speak of this positivist project as a function of the Enlightenment, where subjective ‘I’ and ‘we,’ ‘you’ and ‘me,’ were turned into objective “its”:

“And so, following John Locke, “the teacher of the Enlightenment,” the great modern mapping game was afoot: map the entire Kosmos in empirical terms. And...a century or so into this game of converting the entire Kosmos into objective its, the Enlightenment agenda awoke one morning to find to its utter horror that it was living in a thoroughly disqualified universe – a universe absolutely bereft of value, meaning, consciousness, quality, worth. In mapping exterior correlates, it had gutted all interior depth, had eviscerated the interiors and laid them out to dry in the blazing sun of the monological gaze” (pp.248-9).

This is not a pretty picture: It seems that in its narrow, zealous, almost fanatical quest to purge emotion, feeling, and belief from the realm of knowledge, this rational, objective, *naturalistic* science succeeded, *by its very methodology*, in discounting and discrediting what could be called the vital essence of the human experience – that *humanizing* aspect of experience that touches people most closely. The intellectual backlash to this overt manipulation in recent times has been energetic, at times livid, and often creatively challenging.² In philosophy, the rebuke has come under the heading ‘relativism,’ with the side stream of a more radical ‘irrationalism.’³ As an example of this last school, here is a passage from *A Farewell to Reason*, in which the supposed systematic objective rationality of scientific research is called into question:

“Successful research does not obey general standards; it relies now on one trick, now on another, and the moves that advance it are not always known to the movers. A theory of science that devises standards and structural elements of *all* scientific activities and authorizes them by reference to some rationality-theory may impress outsiders – but it is much too crude an instrument for the people on the spot, that is, for scientists facing some concrete research problem. The most we can do for them from afar is to enumerate rules of thumb, give historical examples, present case studies containing diverging procedures, demonstrate the inherent complexity of research and so prepare them for the morass they are about to enter. Listening to our tale, scientists will get a feeling for the richness of the historical process they want to transform, they will be encouraged to leave behind childish things such as logical rules and epistemological principles and to start thinking in more complex ways – and this is all we can do *because of the nature of the material*. A ‘theory’ of knowledge that intends to do more loses touch with reality” (Feyerabend, p.281).

² W.V.O Quine is given credit for producing a seminal treatise challenging ‘empirical’ science. Way back in 1953 he wrote: “Modern empiricism has been conditioned in large part by two dogmas. One is a belief in some fundamental cleavage between truths which are *analytic*, or grounded in meanings independently of matters of fact, and truths which are *synthetic*, or grounded in fact. The other dogma is *reductionism*: the belief that each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience. Both dogmas, I shall argue, are ill-founded. One effect of abandoning them is, as we shall see, *a blurring of the supposed boundary between speculative metaphysics and natural science*. Another effect is a shift toward pragmatism” (p.20, emphasis added).

³ Speaking of these more recent schools, “[A]ll deny that there is something special to science at all. Science is just one kind of conversation or one form of social organization. Science has no special method, no better chance of finding the truth, no privileged form of justification” (Kincaid, p.8).

Under this relativist or irrationalist wave, as a form of counterpoint, it is science itself that is being discredited and discounted – or more specifically, **positivist** science, value-free science, the ontologically untenable position that there is a preformed, independent, objective reality ‘out there,’ whose mechanisms can be discerned only by the methodology of an impartial, unattached, *expertly trained* observer making accurate representations; and this is what passes for ‘true’ reality. For these reasons Will Wright states flatly that science is “incoherent,” and “scientific epistemology must fail, since we can never have direct and innocent knowledge of an independent and objective world... the idea of achieving objective knowledge of a world *from somewhere outside of the world to be known*” (p.27, emphasis added).

Isn’t that remarkable? Positivist science *is* incoherent. What value could this sort of knowledge have for those of us who are actively living *inside of the world to be known*?

Having thus answered the question, “What exactly is this methodology of the natural science?” we are in a better position to evaluate the core fundamental issue to each of the three research traditions being examined here, namely, “Can there be a *social* science at all?” And if no social science, what could be the function of the social research traditions, where research is understood as “scholarly or scientific investigation or inquiry” (American Heritage)? The answer to these questions comes in varying forms:

“To write about social science at the turn of the 21st century is to invite criticism from many quarters. Skeptical perspectives on truth and knowledge – poststructuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction, critical theory, among others – suggest that there is no such thing as social science, or that a science of society is pernicious... To be sure, members of the human sciences take great pride in their own work, and perhaps, their

particular subfield. Notably absent, however, is an abiding faith in *social science*” (Gerring, pp.xi,xii).

Using the “science” word has gone from bad to worse – from being merely “incoherent” to being outright “pernicious” – *deadly*. There obviously are some strong currents of (methodologically repressed) emotion running here. A similar position of disclaiming science in social study is taken by another recent author:

“Throughout much of its history the basic question in the philosophy of social science has been: is social science scientific, or can it be? Social scientists have historically sought to claim the mantle of science and have modeled their studies on the natural sciences...However, although this approach has yielded important insights into the study of human beings, it no longer grips philosophers or practitioners of social science. Some new approach is required...” (Fay, p.1).

And what will be this new approach?

“The interpretivist or hermeneutical tradition denies that we can understand human behavior in terms of laws, causes, and predictions ... Human behavior is meaningful, and that makes a traditional *science* of society impossible (Geertz 1973, Taylor 1980, Dilthey 1989). We can understand social phenomena, but not by natural science methods. The human sciences need to grasp the meaning of behavior, and they have their own methods for such an interpretive enterprise. Those methods are the ones appropriate to a hermeneutical activity, not a naturalistic science” (Kincaid, p.8).

If you were attentive, you would have detected some contradiction in the views expressed in these passages. It seems that everybody is more than prepared to rail against Science (but not quite ready to completely abandon their identification with it) while at the same time admitting to different *kinds* of science. Is it possible then that there is a kind of science that is appropriate to the study of human and social conditions, as appropriate as, and complementary to, the “hermeneutical activity” mentioned above? I think Kincaid hits the nail on the head when he continues: “If the natural sciences have no special claim to rationality, then we need not worry whether the social sciences can be

like them” (ibid). But of course! It may be just that simple. Using the word “rationality” here actually confuses the issue somewhat; a better insert would be “truth,” but the point is still well taken: There must be some redeeming qualities to Science that are worth retaining; there must be a way of establishing a *social* science that explicitly promulgates a methodology distinct from that of the natural science – a science, in other words, that is distinctly, if not resolutely, *non-positivist*.

In this regard, I especially like the supportive approach of John Gerring, from Boston University, who clearly reasons:

“This is an argument for a broader view of science than is generally understood by the natural science referent...[social scientists] aspire to *science* – which is to say, they intend to study human action in a systematic, rigorous, evidence-based, generalizing, non-subjective, and cumulative fashion” (pp.xiv-xv).

This sounds perfectly acceptable; this is science as systematic, deliberate, and purposeful inquiry. Notably absent above is the word ‘empirical’ – but that is just what the author is inferring: a methodology for producing valid knowledge that relies on observation and direct practical experience, the testing of hypotheses and the generating of theories as lenses through which to contemplate the world. All these activities can surely occur *from somewhere inside of the world to be known*, and so they don’t necessarily need to be positivist; likewise, these activities *can* be value-laden and meaningful. When approached from this broader or more advanced view, Science is a perfectly legitimate method for investigating and producing knowledge about human and social life; we could even speculate that Science, as purposeful systematic inquiry, *has always been* a method in the repertoire of human knowledge construction – long before there was a distinctly ‘positivist’ science, with its associated political infrastructure and surreptitious power-

centralizing mandate. The term ‘social science,’ then, is not a misnomer – *but it is easily bastardized.*

Gerring goes on to suggest placing social science between the natural science and the humanities, as “a distinctive realm of inquiry with a distinctive set of norms and practices” (p.xviii). This gives the social scientist much room to maneuver, so that hermeneutics – interpretive inquiry – is just as much a valid mode of knowledge production as is science – systematic inquiry. In fact, the social scientist has a diverse and flexible array of methods with which to work. It’s not a matter of choosing either/or – either interpretive hermeneutics *or* empirical science – but rather both/and. I am reminded of Wilber’s conception of evolution as moving in stages of “transcend and include, transcend and include.” Here we are transcending **positivist** science but not throwing out Science altogether.

But what are we to make of such a staunch, even fierce, reaction to “empirical science,” even after we’ve been able to easily rationalize and define “empirical” as merely “direct observation and practical experience” and “science” as merely “systematic and purposeful inquiry?”⁴ Is not this reaction, shall we say, *irrational*? How valid could knowledge be if not derived from “direct observation and practical experience?” How could knowledge be communicated and made usable to others in a cumulative way if not

⁴ Here is a simple example of innocuous empirical science: I wake up each morning to find that slugs have been devouring my lettuce starts. Since I want to save some of the lettuce for myself, I decide to take action. I do a little research and find that there are several methods touted for slug control. I decide to conduct experiments to discover which method will be most effective for my particular conditions. The first evening I lay down some copper wire but in the morning there is still slug damage. The second evening I scatter some crushed oyster shell but in the morning it is apparent that the slugs are still getting in. The third evening I lay down a shallow tray full of beer and in the morning it is full of inebriated and quite immobile slugs. Thus, through direct observation and practical experience, I have tested hypotheses and produced a theory: “slugs can be stopped with beer.” I am now able to share this empirical knowledge with my neighbors, though they might not exactly be ready to call me a scientist.

for “systematic inquiry?” It seems to me that instead of “transcend and include” many of our contemporaries have chosen to take sides:

“Two distinguishable cultures are emerging rapidly within the social sciences, removed from each other in vocabularies, values, and visions... [I]t is simply the case that the empiricist tradition continues to remain stalwart within the social sciences, maintaining a steady grip over the future of disciplines, shaping decisions regarding educational curricula, journal policy, hiring and firing criteria, the allocation of research funds, and the representation of the science to society” (Gergen, p.vii).

By reading these words I must assume that the “empiricist tradition” is being considered as a *political* force.⁵ And then:

“As mentioned earlier, a second academic culture has emerged during the past decade, highly varied in its disciplinary origins, but united in its skepticism of the empiricist project for the human sciences... To what extent do traditional presumptions of empirical knowledge remain viable, if the modernist tradition of which they are a manifestation is problematic, and if the institutions rationalized by this tradition are thrown into question?” (ibid, p.xiii).

These passages make clear to me, finally, that the controversy over the term “empirical science” comes from confusing political issues with epistemological issues. Returning to the relativist tradition confirms this conclusion:

“Relativism undermines the traditional pre-eminent standing of science by subverting its claim to specialness... Relativism engenders a keen appreciation for the role political power plays in shaping what we think and do – including the frameworks we inhabit... [T]hus to relativists the “hegemony” of science... shows not its intellectual primacy but instead the power of certain groups to dominate intellectual and political institutions” (Fay, p.2).

And so here is the reason for the staunch and fierce reaction against what is loosely called, even by experienced writers, *empirical* science but which may be more precisely termed *positivist* science: this science is regarded and experienced *as an*

⁵ Perhaps it is significant that the word ‘empiricist’ comes from the same root as ‘empire,’ the Latin *imperium*, dominion, from *imperare*, to command.

instrument of oppression. And so, the revolt is more than understandable, but it seems to me that overthrowing science in the name of liberation has sanctioned in many cases counter-methodologies that actually limit and inhibit the production of valid knowledge. As an example, here is a passage from a prolific writer who has chosen to ‘take sides,’ in this case defending a new approach to what he calls “interpretive ethnography,” a form of qualitative research:

“Ethnographers are now in the “sixth moment” of inquiry. This is a period of intense reflection, “messy texts,” experiments in autoethnography, ethnographic poetics, anthropological and sociological poetry, evocative and layered accounts, short stories, the “New Journalism,” performance texts, plays, ethnographic fictions and ethnographic novels, and narratives of the self.

These messy texts are often grounded in the study of epiphanal moments in people’s lives...Messy texts are many-sided, open-ended, they refuse theoretical closure, and they do not indulge in abstract, analytical theorizing” (Denzin, 1997, p.xvii).⁶

Whatever “messy texts” are, I am sure they are not ‘social science.’ Could they be a form of quasi-humanities? It seems that for Mr. Denzin, speaking of interpretive ethnographies at least, *anything goes*. But for you or me, as beginning social researchers, how could we possibly wade through all these messy texts looking for a tidbit of knowledge that might enhance our understanding of the world if we could not even be certain of the validity or reliability of that knowledge, especially after hearing that validity and reliability are now unfashionable, *passé*. The tidbit might just as easily have come from a bathroom stall as

⁶ Denzin seems to have an obsession with pronouncing the transition to new eras of research methodologies, in the following case writing about what he terms the “fifth moment:” “Gone are words like theory, hypothesis, concept, indicator, coding scheme, sampling, *validity*, and *reliability*. In their place comes a new language: readerly texts, modes of discourse, cultural poetics, deconstruction, interpretation, domination, feminism, genre, grammatology, hermeneutics, inscription, master narrative, narrative structures, otherness, postmodernism, redemptive ethnography, semiotics, subversion, textuality, tropes” (1988, p.432, emphasis added).

from the fruition of disciplined scholarly research. Where are we to place our standards? How are we to judge the “quality of qualitative research” (Seale, 1999)?⁷

It is for reasons like the position defended above that Gerring insists, “There is too much impressionistic narrative in the work of the social sciences, too much rhetoric, and not enough scientific ballast” (p.xii). David Silverman (p.ix) is more pointed in his criticism:

“What I have to say stems from my discomfort with a fairly large proportion of the ‘qualitative’ research to be found in the leading contemporary academic journals. This discomfort stems from four related tendencies:

- 1) A failure of analytic nerve in that the issues of theory-building are, at best, addressed only in the first few lines of an article... This is often allied to a stress on the ‘exploratory’ nature of the research undertaken as opposed to the attempt to test hypotheses deriving from the increasing body of empirical knowledge and analytical approaches.
- 2) The attempt to identify qualitative research with ‘open-ended,’ ‘informal’ interviews. Unlike quantitative researchers, it sometimes seems, our aim is to ‘empathise’ with people and to turn ourselves into mirrors of other people’s ‘experiences.’
- 3) The use of data-extracts which support the researcher’s argument, without any proof that contrary evidence has been reviewed. Alternatively, the attempt to downplay such issues of validity and reliability in research (as either inappropriate or politically incorrect) and to replace them with other criteria like the ‘authenticity’ with which we have reproduced ‘experience.’
- 4) A belief that a particular, partisan moral or political position determines how we analyze data and what constitutes a ‘good’ piece of research.

He goes on to assert that “social theory is not an ‘add-on’ extra but is the animating basis of social research” and “I insist on the relevance of issues of validity and reliability to

⁷ Says Seale: “Quality does matter in qualitative research, but I agree with Denzin that the modernist headings of ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ are no longer adequate to encapsulate the range of issues that a concern for quality must raise. Instead, we need to accept that ‘quality’ is a somewhat elusive phenomenon that cannot be pre-specified by methodological rules. This in fact is the ‘threat’ to quality that I referred to [earlier]: the idea that research must be carried out under the burden of fulfilling some philosophical or methodological scheme. Practising social researchers can learn to do good work from a variety of examples, done with different ‘moments’, without needing to resolve methodological disputes before beginning their work (p.7-8).

field research: we cannot be satisfied merely with... 'telling convincing stories.' Contrary to the assumption of many social scientists, as well as funding bodies, generalisability need not be a problem in qualitative research" (p.x).

This last point about 'generalisability' has been mentioned before, and in the context of an ongoing conversation among scholars, is addressed squarely in an article in the latest issue of the journal *Sociology* (April 2005). Entitled "Generalization in Qualitative Research," the authors define "generalization" as "to claim that what is the case in one place or time, will be so elsewhere or in another time" (Payne and Williams, p.296). Quoting their reasoning on this issue will be a suitable way to begin wrapping up this essay, because their position re-addresses what I have deemed to be the fundamental issue in the social science more generally, namely, "What is or will be the relationship between the social science and the natural science?" I appreciate the following position very much because it once again places social science somewhere in 'the middle:'

"In experimental or survey research, generalizing claims are explicit and constitute the explanation/generalization schema that is the basis of scientific reasoning. In qualitative research, generalizing claims are less explicit. Indeed, some interpretive sociologists (e.g. Denzin, 1983; Denzin and Lincoln, 1995; Marshall and Rossman, 1989) minimize the relevance of generalization or even deny any intention toward generalization in qualitative research.

A belief that one must choose between an 'interpretive sociology', which rejects all generalization, and a sociology dependent on total or axiomatic generalizations (represented by statistical generalizations or physical laws) is too simplistic (Williams, 2000a, 2000b, 2001). Qualitative research methods can produce an intermediate type of limited generalization, '*moderatum* generalizations'. These resemble the modest, pragmatic generalizations drawn from personal experience which, by bringing a semblance of order and consistency to social interaction, make everyday life possible. Indeed, a strong claim can be made that in qualitative research (even in the interpretivist sociology loudest in its rejection of generalization) such *moderatum* generalizations are unavoidable" (ibid, p.295-6).

This is the image or tone with which I would like to leave this brief essay – that of *moderatum*. The social science will never be one of the naturalistic sciences because its research material lies in the impalpable, undulating, often juicy realm of emotions and behavior, and includes such non-tangibles and potential irrationals as: values, meanings, beliefs, feelings, desires, wishes, hopes, dreams, etc. But in order to produce valid and reliable knowledge, knowledge that can be communicated to others and recorded in a cumulative way, and (this is no small matter) in order to maintain fundable standards of quality, the social science would do well to retain some of the characteristics of empirical science more generally. And so, a useful position along the academic spectrum to place social science is somewhere between natural science and the humanities, where it can draw from the accumulated wisdom and inspiration of both while formulating its own distinctive methodologies, goals, and scholarly culture.⁸ Thus positioned moderately, while simultaneously transcending the unnecessary partisan feud between objectivism and relativism, the practicing social researcher will enjoy tremendous freedom and creativity in choosing, from among a growing bounty of methods and techniques, those that are most pertinent, effective, and/or salutary for any given research problem or situation.⁹

⁸ “The natural sciences talk about their results. The social sciences talk about their methods” – Henri Poincare, in Gerring, p.xix.

⁹ To get a feel for this (what could be perplexingly overstated) bounty, here is a random sampling of qualitative methods, by no means authoritative or complete, taken from the website Social Science Information Gateway (www.sosig.ac.uk): Autobiography, Biography, Pathography, Case Study Research, Management Research, Single Case Research Design, Critical Incident Technique, Ethnography, Auto-ethnography, Photo-ethnography, Focus Groups, Discourse Analysis, Qualitative Data Analysis, Content Analysis, Computer-aided Qualitative Data Analysis, Mixed Methods, Non-verbal Communication, Oral History, Critical Oral History, New Paradigm Research, Critical Theory, Feminist Theory, Grounded Theory, Hermeneutics, Humanism, Phenomenology, Phenomenography, Internet Research, Planning Research, Psychology Research, Behavioral Research, Heuristic Research, Cultural Studies, and even Phenomenological Hermeneutics. Perhaps you would like to make up one of your own?

In some research projects or scenarios, a *quantitative* analysis will be desired. Quantitative need not be *positivist* – for we have seen that is determined by attitude – but it definitely is *empirical* and *scientific*. That it is so is stressed in the quantitative literature; for example T.R. Black in *Doing Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences* says:

“The emphasis in this text will be on techniques that enhance one’s ability to make systematic observations and use these as part of the process of testing guesses (hypotheses) about how events can be described. Such an approach is usually described as *scientific* because of its systematic approach and goal of producing replicable studies...(p.4).

And then follows the disclaimer:

“...but this does not necessarily divorce it from humanity nor simply reduce people to the status of numbers on a computer file” (ibid).

That is correct; it does not *necessarily* reduce people to numbers on a computer file, but quantitative research **is** often used that way, and in the wrong hands it reduces people *in order to control their behavior*. Thus if one’s science has an allegiance, however unconscious, to the pernicious power-centralizing and power-consolidating structures, then one’s quantitative research will become *an instrument of oppression* – and so the heartfelt immediacy of the relativist, irrationalist, interpretivist, and constructivist revolt.¹⁰

We’ve already considered some of the issues related to qualitative research, including that in its effort to counterpoint empirical science, and to ensure that research is value-laden and meaningful, it often has moved to the point of becoming invalid and unreliable – “messy.” Yet, the radical interpretivist’s position cannot be discounted so

¹⁰ Very interestingly, another writer (Cook, p.vii) defines three major research traditions – Interpretive, Predictive, and Praxiological – and relates Interpretive as “often originating in continental Europe” and Predictive, or our Quantitative, as “especially common in Anglo-Saxon social science,” so that these approaches, and their concomitant goals, correspond to regional, cultural, and thus political contexts.

easily, for there are real issues at stake. I think the following quote expresses constructively a moderate epistemological stance from which to pursue illumined qualitative research:

“We can now observe that data are produced, not collected, and it is the process of production that is fundamentally related to the product ... Whether overtly, or as a result of the presuppositions that are inevitably embedded within ways of thinking that inform practice and so often remain beyond question, the decisions that are made about theory, methods, methodology, ethics and politics are now open to routine scrutiny. Particular ideas of neutrality, such as the maintenance of objectivity through positioning the researcher as nothing but a passive instrument of data collection, are now exposed as falsehoods that seek to mask the realities of the research process. *The knower (as researcher) is now implicated in the construction of the known (the dynamics and content of society and social relations)*” (May, p.1, emphasis added).

When this understanding is integrated, and researchers approach people not as ‘subjects’ but as what you might call ‘mutual interactants’ or ‘co-creators of knowledge’ – and recognizing that both parties will be transformed in the interaction – then the context will be created for what Schratz and Walker suggest as “Research as Social Change,” and for what Bickman and Rog describe as “Applied Social Research.” Both of these approaches situate research as an active effort to understand and find solutions to real problems in peoples’ lives, not research simply for the sake of accumulating more knowledge. These approaches to research lead to and culminate in our final (and my personal favorite) research tradition: Action Research:

“Action Research is social research carried out by a team encompassing a professional action researcher and members of an organization or community seeking to improve their situation. Action Research promotes broad participation in the research process and supports action leading to a more just or satisfying solution for the stakeholders.

Together, the professional researcher and the stakeholders define the problems to be examined, cogenerate relevant knowledge about them, learn and execute social research techniques, take actions, and interpret the results of actions based on what they have learned...

Because it is a research practice with a social change agenda, Action Research involves a critique of conventional academic practices and organizations that study social problems without trying to resolve them” (Greenwood and Levin, p.4).

Come to think of it, what good is studying social problems *without* trying to resolve them? This attitude just creates distance between the knower and the known – that kind of safe, comfortable, faceless distance that supports and encourages the oppressive role of the outside ‘expert,’ the institutional representative who comes as a detached, objective observer with the hidden agenda of controlling and colonizing. The action researcher, in contrast, “takes seriously the critiques of traditional research methodologies that are inherent in postmodern, feminist, and critical theory” (Stringer, p.xviii), and engages the research as an active participant, as a member of the group who just happens to be a professional researcher.¹¹

Stringer traced the origins of Action Research to a number of thinkers and writers, and summarizes:

“They all acknowledge fundamental investment in processes that

- Are rigorously empirical and reflective (or interpretive)
- Engage people who have traditionally been called *subjects* as active participants in the research process
- Result in some practical outcome related to the lives or work of the participants

Community-based action research sits comfortably with these agendas but has an added dimension that relates to the hidden curriculum of most social encounters. That is, it is designed to encourage an approach to research that potentially has both practical and theoretical outcomes but that does so in ways that provide conditions for continuing action – the formation of a sense of community” (p. xviii).

¹¹ Participation is emphasized so much in genuine Action Research that there is actually a branch called Participatory Action Research. “The addition of the term *participatory* to action research is now necessary to distinguish authentic action research from the miscellaneous array of research types that fall under the description ‘action research’ when data bases are surveyed” (McTaggart, p.1).

Could that be translated as ‘community-building’? This sounds like a research agenda with healing and empowering potential; it reminds me of the liberational pedagogy of Paulo Freire, and on this Peter Park concurs:

“[P]articipatory research is not just a convenient instrument for solving social problems through technically efficacious means, but is also a social practice that helps marginalized people attain a degree of emancipation as autonomous and responsible members of society (Freire, 1982). It is allied to the ideals of democracy, and in that spirit it is proper to call it research of the people, by the people and for the people” (p.80).

In the above article, Park also makes distinctions between different types of knowledge – representational (quantitative), interpretive (qualitative), and relational (action) – that are generated from the different research traditions, and he goes on to enameor, “In its most sublime form, relational knowledge expresses itself as love, in which people become one with each other in a union, which transcends and transforms the individuals involved” (p.84).

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