

In the Seventh Moment of Qualitative Inquiry

Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Editors) *The Qualitative Inquiry Reader*. Sage Publications, International Educational and Professional Publisher. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi. 399 pages.

Reviewed by Egill H. Bragason Ph.D., Rajabhat Institute, Udon Thani, Thailand.

The healthy understanding, we should say, is not the logical, argumentative, but the intuitive; for the end of understanding is not to prove and find reasons, but to know and believe. This quotation from Thomas Carlyle's¹ *Characteristics* (1974, p. 911) came to my mind after reading the *Qualitative Inquiry Reader*. Decades of producing quantitative knowledge in the spirit of positivism and modernism in countless journal articles have neither been very fruitful nor appealing. The qualitative wave in the social sciences, culminating in postmodernism and social constructionism, is an uprising against stagnation. We are not facing a revolution where another set substitutes one set of beliefs. Instead, basic philosophical questions are being asked about the purpose and uses of research, about the nature of truth and understanding. A post-modern and social constructionist stance is that truth must always be relative and beliefs founded on authority are questionable. Ontological questions are the focus of much discussion in the social sciences. Truth, reason and objectivity are viewed as grand narratives, gradually being replaced by a realization of fragmentation, instability and indeterminacy. Realizing this, one may ask what is the likely future development of qualitative inquiry. Will we experience a further refinement of current trends, or is something quite new and different ahead?

According to the editors of the *Qualitative Inquiry Reader*, Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, we are now in the seventh moment of qualitative inquiry. At the present, there are seven influences or historical moments in qualitative inquiry, all more or less effective as sources of influence on ongoing research. They are the traditional period (1900 to 1950), the modernist (1950 to 1970), blurred genres (1970 to 1986), the crisis of representation (1986 to 1990), postmodern or experimental (1990 to 1995), post-experimental (1995 to 2000) and the future (2001 to the present). "The present period continues to be defined by a new sensibility, the core of which is doubt that any discourse has a privileged place, any method of theory a universal and general claim to authoritative knowledge" (Richardson, 1991, p. 173).

If students and scholars interested in qualitative inquiry have felt that the field of qualitative research has come to a peaceful and dignified academic standstill, then this book will awaken them to a different reality. It brings the message that there is a storm rising on the qualitative horizon, but we do not know when it will hit us, from which direction or what its nature will be. The one thing we can be certain of is that the signs are there for all to read. The move towards interdisciplinarity of the social and physical sciences is an important signpost indicating a radical change in the air. Another sign is found when one considers the development of the forces that have influenced qualitative research during the past decades and its unbelievably

¹ Thomas Carlyle, 1795-1881, English author. This citation is from an early essay titled *Characteristics*, was printed in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1831.

rapid progress. Lincoln and Denzin discuss this in the introduction, offering an overview of the complex development of qualitative inquiry as a sociocultural field. Research methods and the understanding of the researcher him- or herself as an inherent part of the whole research project is basic here. For how can the researcher understand his research topic if he does not understand how the process of doing research may change and influence him or her as well as other people?

In the introduction to *The Qualitative Inquiry Reader* the editors state three ambitious goals for the book. They have designed this volume to show “cutting-edge” work in the field of qualitative inquiry, to “present a critical framework for interpreting this new work” and to show “how reflexive methodological work can contribute to critical political and moral discourse”(p. ix). There is no doubt that most or all of the articles published here do satisfy the first claim. Considering the two latter claims, I feel that at least that some contributors deserve them. Let us take a closer look at this. But first, I will try to convey a general impression of the book.

The first thing that comes to mind after reading *The Qualitative Inquiry Reader* is its freshness. Maybe spring freshness is the appropriate word. In all development, there are hurdles and obstacles to overcome. The contributors have pointed out myriad problem fields that must be attended to by people who are serious about developing methods for qualitative inquiry. It is difficult to find a common denominator for the contributions in this book, they are so different and unique. Many of them are focused on how the researchers experience the practice of research and the questions that arise in its wake. Many ask how their research will affect themselves and others, and describe how this has taken place.

Reflexive ethnography

This book comes in five main parts. The first part is called Reflexive Ethnography and contains contributions from four writers. Reflexive ethnography “is that ethnographic form that privileges the presence of the writer in the text” (p. 1) which means that the writer usually speaks in a first-person voice. The moral and political awareness of writers is strongly felt in texts in this category, and there is a lot of experimentation with various forms of writing.

Deborah Ceglowski writes the first chapter, *Research as Relationship*, about reflexive ethnography. This chapter is thought provoking. Ceglowski focuses on issues that are important to researchers, for example the relationship between a researcher and her mentor and the multiple communities that researchers must belong to and be loyal to. This chapter shows how researchers may face various personal dilemmas and how moral questions are sometimes all pervasive and a personal matter for the researcher. The emotions of research are usually neglected in the modernist research tradition but they get due attention here. I do not agree with Ceglowski that a researcher has several Selves, such as a researcher-Self, a parent-Self, a teacher-Self etc, since I prefer to view the Self as whole and one, but this may be a matter of perspective. In short, a good and a useful chapter.

Christopher Dunbar, Jr., calls his chapter *Three Short Stories*. The stories are powerfully written. Dunbar writes about African American students attending an alternative school for students who are judged by society as “incurable, disruptive, social misfits, and academically incompetent” (p. 25). The deep sympathy and humane understanding that Dunbar shows of the almost hopeless situation of the young boys enables him to tell a great story in a few pages. I

am not familiar with other papers by Dunbar but he brings a very important message. I look forward to seeing more of Dunbar's writing in the future. This chapter is well written and memorable.

Laurel Richardson's chapter *Skirting a Pleated Text* is feminist - poststructuralist and her contribution is designed to show us how tradition bound academic forces may be hostile and negative to a woman who dares to question the accepted (positivist - modernist) methods in social science. I want to quote her text: "Applying my theoretical understandings to sociological writing, I asked: "How do the specific circumstances in which we write affect what we write?" And "How does what we write affect who we become?" In answering these questions, I found that if I were to write the Self into being that I wanted to be, I would have to "de-discipline" my academic life" (p. 40). De-disciplining academic life in this case means departing from the traditional, applying writing practices that include poetry, drama, prose, humor and autobiography, to name the main forms. I am certain that many people will want to acquire Richardson's (1997) book "Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life" after reading this chapter.

Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre addresses two topics in her chapter *Nomadic Writing Practices: Rethinking the ethics of traditional research practices and the function of writing in qualitative inquiry*. This is done in the context of a study of the construction of subjectivity of a group of older white women that is fascinating to read about. St. Pierre concludes that texts may be a site of ethical work and at the same time that the act of writing may help researchers to think in a different way about their research topics and the research methods. This is an ethical process of discovery and new context for ethics. This chapter offers insights into important topics. I feel that its main contribution is in the many perspectives that are offered on ethics and research methods.

Autoethnography

The second part of this book consists of four contributions of autoethnography. Autoethnography can be defined as a form of writing one's own biography from a specific ethnographic perspective "... that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal and the cultural" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 739). The four contributions are all interesting to read.

Elena Tajima Creef's chapter is titled *Discovering My Mother as the Other in the Saturday Evening Post*. She writes about her mother - a Japanese war bride to a US serviceman in WW2 - as the "other", i.e. a person who is a focus of a research that soon engulfs both mother and daughter and is expressed in poetry, photography and autoethnography. Besides autoethnography, this chapter contains a useful description of how a research project may turn out in unexpected ways for the novice researcher and student. In this project, the limits between researcher and the researched, the insider and the outsider, gradually disappear with interesting consequences. This chapter is entertaining, it reads like a good short story.

Jean Halley's chapter is titled *This I know* and explores a part of her family history that had been a taboo subject. She was the victim of sexual abuse and trauma as a child and uses experimental writing to explore this as well as ideologies and what is involved in knowing some things and not others. Halley challenges the traditional writing methods of sociology in order

to understand her world and her experiences. This chapter is very thought provoking, it shows independence in writing, great power and a determination of spirit.

Carol Rambo Ronai writes about *The Next Night Sous Rature: Wrestling With Derida's Mimesis*. Ronai is credited with the invention of the layered text, mixing various styles and writing forms into a single piece. The textual layers are gradually added and the interpretation of meaning changes and develops throughout the text. There are three main avenues here: writing, identity and experience. The borders between them fade until the three as a whole are observed as a process of creation and destruction. This chapter is fun to read and very informative. The subject is the author's experiences on an all-girl dance and wrestling troupe, entered for the purpose of doing research about male and female striptease dancers. "Ultimately, lived experience, identity, and writing can be seen as simultaneous processes of destruction and creation" (p. 105).

On Becoming Italian American - an Autobiography of an Ethnic Identity is the title of Richard V. Travisano's chapter. This chapter is written in a catching style and an almost incredible amount of family information, experiences and personal history is written into only 30 pages. Travisano's project is to re-discover the past and to put present time America into a context of ethnicity. He argues that much has been lost in the process of becoming American and letting go of the old ethnic roots that put color on life and people in his younger days. Travisano's chapter has a powerful message to contemporary Americans. I want to recite from one of his poems here (p. 151):

*Big problem for this country: people who know who they are
don't know enough about it to be themselves; and those who
don't know who they are, end up acting like someone else.*

*But hey ho, without lives, you know,
they might end up on the Winfrey show!*

The four contributions on autoethnography have one thing in common and that is the element of self-discovery through writing. This process is often painful. The four authors have not experienced anything that is really out of the ordinary life experiences of most people. It is how they put these experiences of everyday life into a context of self-discovery that is interesting.

As I see it, the problem of autoethnography is that the texts that are created may only be interesting to the authors but as much to other people. The exception happens when the topic is interesting or exotic in some way or when the writer has lived a long and an interesting life with many stories to tell. The problem about expressing the past is that the word is not the thing, and the word demands interpretation. The reader must do the interpretation. The process of autoethnography therefore involves two stages: the interpretation of the author of his or her lived experience, and the interpretation of the reader of the author's interpretation. In the end, the credibility and appeal of an autoethnographic text rests with the reader. This, however, is unrelated to the process of self-discovery that may take place during research.

Poetics

The third part of the book presents ‘poetics’. I prefer to use the word poetry, because that is what this is. This part covers only twenty-five pages and is the book’s shortest section. More specifically, we are talking about poetic, narrative texts here. One achievement of ‘poetics’ is to express what needs to be expressed in an artistic way, but to be an artist is a gift that is not given to everyone. As I see it, researchers are experimenting with poetry in order to express that which cannot be expressed in other ways. This effort is commendable, although people may have different opinions about the quality or artistry of the poems.

The four contributors are Ivan Brady, Mark Novak, Miles Richardson and Mary Weems. These authors are all markedly different writers. The poetry of Brady is in my opinion best described by saying that it is *prose-turned-into-poetry*. The layout is what makes his poem, *A Gift of the Journey*, a poem rather than the content or the lyrical style. Mark Novak’s poem *Two Micro-ethnographies* demands quite a lot of interpretation, it is modern in form and in content. Miles Richardson’s *The Anthro in Cali* is, like Brady’s lyrics, more prose than poetry. The subject is interesting, though. Speaking from a strictly personal point of view, I find that the poetry of Mary E. Weems stands out here as genuine art. Weems has the lyrical gift of the poet and her poetry is a great inspiration. In *Windows*, for example, she presents her artistic gift and inspiration. See for example the following lines from *Windows* (p. 170):

*I am the long playing album
the open space
the first eye to open
the last eye to shut
“every shut eye ain’t sleep”
enemies rest on my face.*

*I am everywhere
original.*

Researchers-turned-poets should not forget that self-criticism is an essential part of writing good and enduring poetry. Some poems have to mature over time like good wine, they must be processed, stored, written and re-written before they come in a final form. In other words, the poet must possess self-criticism of his art. The English poet and author Matthew Arnold wrote: “... everyone can see that a poet, for instance, ought to know life and the world before dealing with them in poetry; and life and the world being in modern times very complex things, the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it; else it must be a comparatively poor, barren, and short-lived affair.” (Matthew Arnold² 1974, p. 1385). I do not mean to measure the ‘poetics’ of these contributors against the work of world famous classical writers, but I believe that constructive self-criticism is necessary for all artists and especially so for artist-social-scientist. Some of the poetry presented here would benefit from more polishing, but it is a step in the right direction, using new forms of expression to reach the public.

² The main question asked by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) in his life’s work was: *How is a full and enjoyable life to be lived in a modern industrial society?* I must admit that I am amused by the fact that modern writers and researchers in the social sciences are still occupied with this very topic. But every generation may demand a new and different answer, *The Qualitative Inquiry Reader* is sufficient proof of that.

Performance Narratives

Part Four contains two performance narratives. The concept of performance narrative is elusive and not easily defined. It reflects the existential crisis of postmodern thought by presenting multiple meanings and events. The performance narrative often examines personal experience from different angles and questions the nature of the knowledge gained in the process. Power, control and social oppression are frequent themes. A performance text may strive to be many things at the same moment of time but the element of drama is the common denominator of the narrative. This drama is different from the classical and modern theater drama because it considers the audience to be a part of the play. In a performance narrative, almost everything is possible.

The first performance narrative presented here is written by Stacy Holman Jones and is titled *Torch*. The subject is a part of a larger study about torch singers as performers and the main themes are the author's personal experiences "...as a scholar, feminist, music lover, writer and woman" (p. 183). In this text, Jones displays what I do not hesitate to call a considerable literary and artistic talent. This is, for example, illustrated in the following passage:

Downtown, she moves in neon shadows. She enters the large, windowless room-her black box-and saturates every surface with the sounds of despair. With each beat, each tremulous note, she strips herself bare until she is standing stark naked. Enshrined in the white heat of the spotlight, the words she sings etch the stigmata of desire. The paying public devours her whole. Her skin remains. (P. 186)

The performance narrative written by Ronald J. Pelias is called *Always dying: Living between Da and Fort*. Da and Fort are terms from Freud's psychoanalysis, Da meaning *here* and Fort meaning *gone*. The narrative swings constantly between these two opposite poles of time and experience, of what is had and what is gained, of what is here and what is lost. This text is intended to be read out loud. It requires several readings before a final interpretation becomes possible. This performance narrative is well written and entertaining, but a pessimistic note is frequently apparent. For example this excerpt from p. 227:

"There, it is all about loss. Everything is dying. First, there was God, then the author, and now, the subject. All that is left is an inaccessible is. Everything slips away."

Assessing the Text

The fifth and final part of the Qualitative Inquiry Reader is focused assessing the text. In other words, it is concerned with the criteria for evaluating qualitative work. Whole 170 pages are devoted to contributions from six writers about this topic, showing its importance. The main objection of positivists and others on qualitative research has long been the supposedly invalid and unreliable research methods and results, some people going as far as labeling the whole field unscientific. The contributions in this section contain an answer to this criticism but they are far more: they show how qualitative inquiry has expanded and made use of many current cultural, artistic and philosophical influences all merging in an emphasis on bettering and developing the research methods.

In the foreword to this section, the editors write that there are moral and ethical criteria for evaluating qualitative work at the present time. Underlying this is the will to understand how power and ideologies influence and reflect research. Power and knowledge merge, becoming the same force, erasing the "...usual distinctions between epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics" (p. 230). This results in a position where knowing something involves responsibility for that knowledge and how it is used, both in a moral and an ethical sense.

Linda Liska Belgrave and Kenneth J. Smith write about *Negotiated Validity in Collaborative Ethnography*. Their article seeks to "reconstruct and analyze the process of conducting a collaborative, interpretive study of the experience of Hurricane Andrew" (p. 233). This article is interesting, it contains a relevant discussion of validity and how the personal background of researchers and their theoretical positions and interests affected the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Individual differences between the two writers were found to be "complementary rather than contradictory" and "collaboration made it possible to identify some of the biases we brought to the task and yielded a richer interpretation of the hurricane experience than either of us would have produced alone" (p. 233). Belgrave and Smith conclude that the question about validity and its nature has no final answer. This chapter is informative, written in an open style, about how validity is associated with research design, the process of interviewing, investigator biography, interview technique, and collaborative and individual interpretation.

The title of Steinar Kvale's chapter is *The Social Construction of Validity*. As this heading indicates, Kvale discusses the validity issue from the perspective of a postmodern approach. A modernist position entails that "true" knowledge must be a reflection of reality and thus only valid if this were the case, while the postmodern stance treats validity as a social construction. Kvale extends the concept of construct validity, so important in the modernist research tradition, to include social construction of reality. He then goes on to discuss the validity issue from three basic approaches. The first approach of validity is to treat it as a quality of craftsmanship: by checking, questioning and theorizing about the phenomena under study a researcher may gradually increase the overall validity of his research. The second approach is to abandon the truth-reality correspondence criteria of validity and test it in a dialogue about the research results and observations. This is communicative validity, obtained by using arguments and logic in a discourse. In a hermeneutical approach, truth is gradually approached using the dialogue, for example between a researcher and his research subjects. The third and final approach to validity is pragmatic: the validity of research may be judged according to the real and objective effects it has. Knowledge is treated here as action and effective action is also valid action. Kvale has worked with the validity question for a long time and written extensively about it; this chapter summarizes this work well and offers a logical and a systematic approach to understand issues of validity in qualitative research.

Chapter 19 is written by Yvonna S. Lincoln under the title *Emerging Criteria for Quality in Qualitative and Interpretive Research*. Lincoln's style is clear and to the point. She states that she prefers to treat the validity problem in interpretive inquiry as an issue of emerging criteria of validity. This position is logical because the field of interpretive inquiry is still emerging and gradually being defined. Lincoln argues for the importance of an ongoing discourse about validity criteria in the interpretive community of researchers because this will "...engage and elaborate a complex and interesting dialogue and to create a space for a shared discourse wherein we might discover a new community of interpreters" (p. 328). Lincoln shows that

most of the validity criteria that have emerged so far are relational, meaning that they recognize and validate *relationships* between the researcher and the people who are the focus of the research. The criteria that have emerged are relational and ethical, they emphasize factors such as community, critical subjectivity, reciprocity and sacredness. A constructionist position with regard to validity also means that the distinction usually made between standards of evaluating the quality of research and research ethics disappears. A new research ethics is proposed here, and it is emphasized that different approaches to the issue of validity should be used in different kinds of research.

Monica Russel y Rodriguez writes about *Confronting Anthropology's Silent Praxis – Speaking Of/From a Chicana Consciousness*, which is the title of chapter 20. This chapter is powerfully written, it questions some of the basic principles underlying ethnographic practice, theory and covert racial discrimination in an academic setting. Monica Russel y Rodriguez shows how it may be impossible to work within the limits of accepted anthropological paradigms for a native of a minority group. The anthropologist may find herself in a dilemma when she is a native of the same group that she is describing and trying to understand - in this case the Chicana of Mexico – because she may become an offer to prejudice. There is also the conflict between her several selves: *the Chicana native, the newcomer in academe, the overeducated at home, the minority among the majority in the university department*. She does not find her many selves contradictory, it is rather a feeling of belonging to several homes, but her position is such that she finds herself to be subject to oppositional strategies and a silencing of her voice (p. 348). It appears that academic practice may act to maintain racism in a subtle way by favoring some native people of minority groups by using them as *emblems of diversity* while offering them “hyperprivileges”. To be accepted as a minority group native anthropologist by white, Euro-American colleagues may in fact be only a token gesture designed to maintain a practice of racial discrimination. “To speak and write as a scholar of color, in any case, is tolerated at best, feared at worst, and by and large not thought of as theoretically significant” (p. 357). The result of this is that the researcher is denied her multiple subjectivity, including her nativity, both theoretically and methodologically. She struggles to escape from being viewed as a stereotype and realizes that in order to be true to her self, she must sacrifice the comforts and security of a comfortable career (p. 365). This is the basic message of this important chapter.

Possible future developments

At the beginning of this review I mentioned that according to the editors of the book, we are now in the seventh moment of qualitative inquiry. The question is what the future will involve. My overall interpretation of the message of the Qualitative Inquiry Reader gives some hints of what this might be.

Social scientists pursue their academic activities for many reasons, personal and professional. At the core of qualitative inquiry is a belief that research will ultimately contribute to social progress and improvement of the human condition. When people realized that modernism - positivism did not live up to this goal and could even be understood as facets of social oppression in science, the road was clear for the qualitative research wave. One important question to be asked now is whether the qualitative wave will contribute to emancipation, or will qualitative research simply mirror the current social and cultural values of a market and a consumer society and thus maintain oppression (see Kvale, 2002). This question leads to

another one, namely what does history teach about the nature of social influence of people who had a deep insight into social conditions in the past?

Social change occurs as a result of great many factors, science being but one of them. It is true that science has revolutionized technology and affected the whole population of this planet. But what about the social influence of social science? Not many social scientists have had a profound and revolutionary impact on the thinking of their contemporary society. Artists, writers, poets and philosophers have had far more influence on social development in general than social scientists. It is possible to find exceptions, for example the immense impact of Freud's psychoanalysis on social and cultural thought during the 20th century. But Freud was more than a scientist: He had insight into the nature of man that enabled him to see through the veneer of social hypocrisy and expose truths that had immediate appeal to his readers. I do not see any social scientists of Freud's magnitude today. "Unscientific" literature, on the other hand; prose, poetry and fiction, have always had a powerful effect on culture and society. One has only to think of writers like Charles Dickens, George Bernard Shaw and Alexander Solzhenitsyn to see this point. These and many other great writers have truly contributed to changing the world and their own countries.

The question, then, facing social science and qualitative inquiry today is how to reach the public, how to make a social impact. The contributions in the Qualitative Inquiry Reader clearly show that many social scientists are moving to new modes of expression in the spirit of drama, prose and poetry in order to reach the general public. The seventh moment of qualitative inquiry may, in my opinion, consist of a further development, focusing and refinement of this trend. We are experiencing a time of rebirth by the way of a Neo - Romantic Movement in the social sciences. The subject matter, accordingly, is often the individual experiences of researchers while they are engaged in research. Their thoughts and emotions are described in contrast to a detached intellectualism and attempts at *concrete* description of people and social conditions. This does not mean that the scientific method will be abandoned. It means that the question of what constitutes a scientific method and how it affects our world will continue to be asked and put to the test.

One basic message of the Qualitative Inquiry Reader is that knowledge is power. The researcher cannot escape the responsibility of his or her power, or the consequences of power. The ethical and moral demands are satisfied by giving the knowledge to the people who need it, to the audience, to the silent masses that were ignored by social scientists for too many years. The qualitative researcher knows that he cannot detach his person from the research, and that self-understanding may be the key to understand other people.

This book is highly recommendable and serious students, teachers and researchers in the field of qualitative inquiry are encouraged to obtain it in order to get up-to-date information about what is happening in the field. This book is also well suited to be a part of the syllabus of university courses on qualitative research methods.

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