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Qualitative Inquiry And The Challenge Of Scientific Status

Kenneth J. Gergen
Swarthmore College, kgergen1@swarthmore.edu

Chapter 1

Qualitative Inquiry and the Challenge of Scientific Status

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Is qualitative research truly scientific? This is no small question in the halls of academia, and it is not insignificant in many quarters of society. It has been an especially heated issue in my field of psychology. Few of the major research journals in psychology will even submit qualitative research papers to peer review. And the recent attempt to establish qualitative research as a sanctioned section of the American Psychological Association required five years of intense struggle before achieving success. This may strike one as paradoxical, as the grounding work of many of psychology's major theorists—including Freud, Ebbinghaus, Piaget, Lorenz, and Vygotsky, among others—was primarily qualitative in nature. We may properly ask, then, how did qualitative research lose its scientific status? And, if such research is without credentials in the scientific community, then what promise is there that such efforts can acquire global significance?

In what follows, I first touch on the rise of empiricist foundationalism and the consequent fall of qualitative inquiry from scientific grace. I then turn to the more recent erosion of

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foundational science within the intellectual world more generally. This erosion has, in turn, set the stage for a paradigm transformation—from an empiricist to a social constructionist epistemology of science. It has simultaneously fueled the explosion in qualitative inquiry across the social sciences. Finally, I propose that, within this latter context, we find the global potentials of qualitative inquiry to be far greater than what could ever be offered within the empiricist tradition.

The Hegemony of Empiricist Foundationalism

While this history is well known and well documented, a brief recounting is useful for understanding the potentials of qualitative inquiry today. The tension separating the quantitative and qualitative orientations to scientific understanding can be traced to at least the German intellectual debates of the late 1800s. As scholars moved to develop a science of human behavior, a major split took place between those believing such a science should emulate the natural sciences and those holding that the nature of human action demanded a far different orientation to knowledge. Scholars such as Dilthey (1896) and Weber (2011 [1917]) argued, for example, that human action largely issues from individual thought, experience, and intention. Unlike natural science orientation, in which the attempt is to observe and analyze from a dispassionate distance, understanding the subjective world of the actor requires immersion in an engaged process of nuanced and possibly empathic interpretation. This emphasis on the interpretive character of qualitative inquiry remains today. However, largely because of the visible success of the natural sciences in contributing to commerce, medicine, military might, and the economy, the argument for a seemingly nebulous science of behavior held little appeal.

Because of the dramatic successes of the natural sciences, early in the 20th century philosophers were interested in establishing rational foundations for scientific activity. If these foundations could be properly articulated, then it would be possible for scholars in all realms of the academic world to become scientific—and thus "productive." Drawing from longstanding empiricist and rationalist epistemologies, various amalgams emerged; what came

to be known as "logical empiricism" was the preferred term used in many scientific circles more generally.

This term came to serve as the rational grounds for what many social scientists see as "mainstream science" within their respective fields. From this standpoint, the primary task of science is to generate systematic accounts of the world that accurately represent its nature. These accounts (descriptions and explanations) are objective only insofar as they can be verified by others; their universality depends on the range of observational settings in which they are verified (or fail to be falsified). Their ultimate utility in prediction and control depends on establishing causal (if/then) relationship among observables. Political, ideological, and moral values are irrelevant to the process of establishing objective knowledge. At worst, they may bias the process of observation. Methods of research were established essentially to ensure that the scientists' accounts realized these ideals. Experimental methods could warrant propositions about cause and effect; standardized measures could ensure that the research is replicable; large, representative samples lent themselves to broad generalizations; statistics added credibility to such generalizations; and a wide range of controls (e.g., double blind experiments, standardized protocols, multiple item measures) protected against value biases. On these grounds, it is clear that qualitative research is indeed a degraded form of inquiry; it fails on virtually all of the above criteria.

Yet, within the empiricist perspective a place—however minuscule—is reserved for qualitative research. Influential here is Popper's (1959) early distinction between the *context of discovery* and the *context of justification*. As he proposed, there is, strictly speaking, no foundational logic for the development of an idea (abstract propositions, theoretical conceptions). However, the full arsenal of rigorous methods, sampling, and statistical analyses are required for the justification of any scientifically sound proposition. For this, the place for qualitative research is to be found in the context of discovery. It is typically argued that as Freud listened to his patients or Piaget interacted with children, important theoretical ideas emerged. In no way did these initial observations

justify the truth value of their theories, but they were useful as creative catalysts. Truth value depended on rigorous scientific test. Although qualitative researchers themselves seldom use this logic, it has left them a small place at the table of mainstream psychology.

As the qualitative movement has mushroomed in the social sciences more generally, other means have slowly developed for justifying the scientific status of qualitative inquiry. Of special appeal to mainstream empiricists has been the argument for mixed methods. Mixed methods research advances the idea that while standardized measures, sampling, statistics, and so on are essential in establishing objective accuracy, qualitative research is useful in locating more subtle features of the subject matter. And, too, qualitative research can be used to assist in justifying explanations for the observed phenomena. Many qualitative researchers add that qualitative approaches are actually more acceptable for reflecting the nature of certain subject matters, for example, the personal experience of the research subject. More recently, scholars such as Westerman (2011) and Yanchar (2011) have attempted to demonstrate how quantitative methods can be used in the service of qualitative and humanistically invested research. Importantly, however, all of these arguments remain "in paradigm"; they all assume that the function of science is to generate accounts that are true to the world as it is.

From Empiricist Foundations to Social Epistemology

During the past several decades of scholarly inquiry, an enormous and far-reaching transformation has taken place in the concept of knowledge and the attendant concepts of truth, objectivity, and validity. Briefly, the transformation can be traced in its earliest phases to a number of insoluble conceptual problems inherent in attempts to establish rational foundations for scientific knowledge, especially empiricists' accounts of such knowledge. Included among the insoluble problems is the challenge of matching words to world (Quine, 1960), accounting for the origin of theory (Popper, 1959), and sustaining falsification in light of the infinite plasticity of theory (Duhem, 1954). However, with the growing

critiques of the dominant orders—government, commerce, law, and military, and the resulting oppression and bloodshed of the past century—a new wave of critical work began to emerge. From this work, an alternative to what Mislevy (1997) characterized as a "discarded epistemology" came about. To appreciate the implications for a world-relevant psychology, three of these critical movements need particular attention: (1) ideological analysis; (2) linguistic and literary theory; and (3) the social construction of scientific knowledge.

Ideological Analysis

Central to the positivist/empiricist movement is the view that empirically grounded descriptions carry no ideological biases. As proposed, properly supported scientific accounts of the world do not reflect the values, moral prescriptions, or religious beliefs of any particular group. This view met an early challenge from Marxist theorists, who argued that capitalist economic theory—despite all the research and analysis in its support—was essentially a mystifying means of fortifying the existing class structure. Such critique gained additional depth as scholars began to study the rhetoric of scientific accounts (see, e.g., Gross, 1996). One could begin to see how social science terms such as "conformity," "prejudice," "obedience," "aggression," "altruism," "development," "mental illness," and "intelligence" were saturated with value, and how such values would not only color the interpretation of findings but the way in which such findings were presented to and used by the public.

This early critical work subsequently unleashed a broad and continuing critique of scientific accounts in terms of their subtle biases in matters of gender, race, economic class, religion, culture, and more. Whose voices, they continue to ask, are being silenced, exploited, or erased? Many critics found their work galvanized by the writings of Michel Foucault (1978, 1980). As Foucault argued, when authoritative claims to knowledge are circulated through society, they act as invitations to believe. As people embrace these claims, they come to act in ways that support them. Or, in Foucault's terms, claims to knowledge function to build and sustain structures of power. Thus, for example, when an authoritative group singles out certain behaviors and calls them

indicators of "intelligence," develops measures that claim to be valid indicators of intelligence, and uses these to grant privileges to certain people and not others, they sustain a position of power in society. More broadly, these critiques raise questions regarding the ideological and social implications and outcomes of all representations of the world.

Linguistic and Literary Theory

A second major challenge to empiricist foundationalism emerged from linguistic and literary theory. To appreciate what is at stake, it is useful to consider two broad implications of de Saussure's classic work, *Course in General Linguistics*. In simple terms, de Saussure first proposed that the relationship between words and their referents is ultimately arbitrary. For example, each of us is assigned a name, and this assignment is useful in sustaining longstanding social conventions of identification. Yet, there is no inherent reason we could not have been given other names (or no name at all). Or, more generally, all naming is essentially arbitrary. In this light, it is interesting to consider the empiricist concepts of accuracy, objectivity, and truth. All depend on the assumption that certain words correspond to or mirror what is the case. In this view, certain utterances are truth bearing, while others are exaggerated or untrue. If, however, the relationship between words and world is ultimately arbitrary, then multiple possible utterances could be used to represent any state of affairs. What privileges any particular arrangement of words as being "true" is established solely through social convention. In terms of observations, it is no more true to say that objects are propelled to Earth by the force of gravity than to say that they are thrust downward by God's will. Thus, when claims are made to truth, objectivity, or accuracy in reporting, we are being exposed to one way of putting things that is privileged by certain groups of people. Following the preceding discussion on value saturation, the question that must then be asked is to what extent does a given way of putting things serve particular interests?

de Saussure's second significant proposal was that words function within rule governed systems of usage. Put simply, our language functions in terms of various conventions, most particularly

in terms of rules of grammar and syntax, but more generally in terms of genres, idioms, definitions, and vernaculars. It may be said that all descriptions of the world will be significantly affected by conventions of writing. Or, more extendedly, all descriptions and analyses of the nature of the world will necessarily be driven by the demands of a tradition of representation. This line of thinking has subsequently led to substantial study of the ways in which scientific accounts are governed by linguistic devices such as metaphor (e.g., Leary, 1990) and narrative (e.g., Genette, 1980). In the latter case, for example, evolutionary theory is only intelligible by virtue of its drawing from narrative traditions of storytelling (Landau, 1993).

The Social Construction of Scientific Knowledge

These preceding critiques, emerging in quite separate domains of scholarship, are amalgamated in a third and perhaps the most essential contribution to a viable replacement for empiricist epistemology. The movement here is also essentially toward a social epistemology. Its origins may be found in Mannheim's (1952 [1929]) volume, *Ideology and Utopia*. As Mannheim proposed: (1) the scientist's theoretical commitments may usefully be traced to social (as opposed to empirical) origins; (2) scientific groups are often organized around certain theories; (3) theoretical disagreements are therefore issues of group conflict; and (4) what we assume to be scientific knowledge is therefore a byproduct of a social process. This seminal work was followed by a substantial number of influential contributions, including those of Fleck (1981), Winch (1946), Gurvitch (1966), Berger and Luckmann (1966), and Habermas (1971).

However, in terms of ultimate impact, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is unparalleled. Most importantly, this work represented a frontal challenge to the longstanding presumption that scientific knowledge is progressive, that with continued research—testing hypotheses against reality—we come ever closer to the truth. Thus, proposed Kuhn, the shift from a Ptolemaic to a Copernican account of the relation of the Earth to the sun is not progress toward truth; nor is the shift from Newtonian theory to quantum mechanics in physics.

Rather, Kuhn proposed, our propositions about the world are embedded within paradigms, roughly a network of interrelated commitments (to a particular theory, conception of a subject matter, methodological practices, and the like).

Even our most exacting measurements are only sensible from within the paradigm. A look into a microscope tells you nothing unless you are already informed about the nature of the instrument and what you are supposed to be looking at. What we call progress in the above cases of astronomy and physics is not, then, movement from a less to a more objectively accurate account of the world. They represent shifts in paradigm, different ways of thinking and observing. In recent decades, this social view of science has been buttressed by an enormous body of scholarship centered on the cultural and historical contingency of scientific knowledge.

As broadly acknowledged, the philosophical attempt to establish logical foundations for empirical knowledge, is now moribund. Rather, summarizing the three critical waves outlined above, we find that scientific knowledge is a byproduct of negotiated agreements among people concerning the nature of the world. Whatever exists makes no fundamental requirements regarding our attempts to describe and explain. But once we have entered into a particular tradition of understanding as represented in a shared language, this tradition will provide both direction and limits on our explanations, descriptions, and observations. Further, all such traditions will be wedded to particular ways of life; that is, they will carry certain implicit or explicit values or desired goals. The implications here for globally relevant inquiry are substantial. This turn to a social epistemology—often viewed as social constructionist—invites a radical expansion in ways of thinking about and practicing inquiry itself. No methodology can claim transcendent superiority and all may add dimensions to our ways of understanding the world. So, too, does a constructionist shift invite critical creative deliberation on the politics, values, and cultural assumptions carried by any particular form of inquiry. By the same token, we are invited into curiosity about forms of inquiry emerging from other cultural climes.

The Global Potentials of the Qualitative Movement

In my view, with a shift from an empiricist to a constructionist vision of science, the global potentials of the qualitative movement are vastly enhanced. By global potentials, in this case I primarily mean the capacity to bring together engaged researchers from around the world into productive dialogue with world-changing intent. In many respects, the qualitative movement has already begun to realize these potentials. And, to be sure, these realizations can only partially be traced to the emergence of the above-described transformation in the conception of knowledge (Wertz, 2011). However, the pluralist consciousness invited by our increasing immersion in the global communication flow does lend itself to much the same sense of socially constructed worlds. Regardless of the source—philosophical or experiential—there are at least five ways in which the qualitative movement holds great promise.

Inviting All Voices

Within the empiricist tradition, participation in the dialogues of science is legitimated by embracing the tradition's epistemic assumptions. Unless one follows the tradition's restricted rules of reasoning and evidence, one has no audience. Discussions of personal experience, deeply held values, spiritual concern, political ideology, and aesthetic taste, for example, are simply irrelevant to the demands of the science qua science. In contrast, one of the most noteworthy features of the contemporary qualitative movement is its radical pluralism. Within relevant organizations, conferences, and journals, for example, one finds phenomenologists, hermeneuticists, discourse analysts, action researchers, narrative researchers, ethnographers, autoethnographers, collaborative researchers, performatively oriented scholars, and more. To be sure, within this spectrum there are deep divisions concerning, for example, the conception of the person, political values, and theoretical orientation. Yet, seldom are discussions directed toward establishing preeminence—a "right," "superior," or "necessary" way of proceeding. Nor are there explorations of consilience, the convergence of evidence on a single, objective, and accurate

understanding of the world. Productive dialogue replaces hegemonic expansion.

As I see it, the common assumption underlying this gracious acceptance of multiplicity is the absence of commanding foundations—rational, evidential, valuational, or otherwise—to which one can justifiably lodge a case for preeminence. Rather, consistent with constructionist reasoning, there is a common understanding that all our practices emerge within historically and culturally bounded traditions. Fighting it out for a "first philosophy" squanders both time and resources. It is far more enriching to explore the multiplicities and to probe both their potentials and limits. In this way, qualitative researchers are also open to the Indigenous movement in the social sciences, as one may learn from virtually all the world's traditions of understanding and inquiry. Further, most realize that empiricist practices of research, shorn of their foundational claims, may similarly hold promise. In terms of global potentials, then, the qualitative movement is optimally situated to bring into common conversation the voices of scholars and practitioners from around the world.

Grappling with "the Good"

As discussed earlier, traditional empiricism attempts to escape deliberation on issues of ideology, morality, or human values. Science is supposed to accurately reflect on the nature of the world, not make moral and political judgments on its nature. We have also touched on the flaws inherent in this posture. In contrast, within the qualitative movement there is a pervasive awareness of the interpretive processes involved in conducting research and drawing conclusions, and with this an consciousness of the ways in which values are inherent in these processes. There is also something important about the way in which most qualitative methods imply a deep respect for the participants. The way in which qualitative researchers listen to others, take them seriously, and often sympathize with them reveals a strong humanistic investment in research. It should come as little surprise that the one division of the American Psychological Association that has emphasized qualitative methods over the decades is the division on humanistic psychology.

This concern with issues of ideology, politics, and values becomes boldly articulated in Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, and the Denzin and Giardina (2008) volume, *Qualitative Inquiry and Social Justice*. In both cases, the authors/editors view the achievement of social justice as the major aim of qualitative inquiry. This view is also amplified in Steinberg and Canella's (2012) *Critical Qualitative Research Reader*. In my view, however, the qualitative movement has provided an opportunity for researchers to use their work for wide-ranging political and ideological purposes, including, for example, the promotion of peace, deconstructing psychodiagnostics, the creation of collaborative relations, undermining the naturalization of psychological categories, the generation of shared decision making, generating understanding of criminal activity, the creation of community, and fighting against psychopharmacology, among many others. The important point is that within the qualitative movement more generally, methods do not provide an escape from issues of "the good"; rather, one chooses qualitative inquiry as an expression of one's values.

Transforming Society

Within the traditional empiricist perspective, the challenge for the scientist is to establish basic knowledge—in this case about human behavior. It is not the scientist's task, qua scientist, either to apply this knowledge or to disseminate it to the general public. In contrast, because of their investments in issues of political or societal consequence, participants in the qualitative movement are very often engaged in projects of social transformation. Typically, these are indirect, as many hope their published works can stimulate public and classroom debate and thus lead to change. However, in terms of actual change, the most promising forms of inquiry lie within the range of action initiatives, especially participatory and community-based action research. The journals *Action Research* and the *International Journal of Action Research*, along with Reason and Bradbury's (2008) *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*, provide ample illustrations of the potentials of such initiatives for social change. Favorite exemplars of mine include Fine and Torre's (2006) research assisting women

in prison, Lykes's (2001) community-building work with rural Guatemalan women, and Russell and Bohan's (1999) innovative resistance to anti-gay legislation.

Within the action arena, a special place should be given to the development of innovative practices; that is, moving beyond specific and discrete action initiatives, to creating practices that may be used in wide-ranging settings. For example, David Cooperrider and his associates have developed the practice of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). Although developed primarily for purposes of organizational change, the practice has been used globally in helping otherwise conflicted groups develop more viable forms of relationship. The practice has also been used to develop the new national constitution in Nepal and by the world's religions to develop a United Religions organization. In another exemplary case, therapists in the Boston area have developed a powerful dialogic practice for reducing intense or deep-seated conflict. Termed the Public Conversations Project (1996–present; www.publicconversations.org), this particular practice has been used in numerous situations to defuse antagonisms—civil, religious, and political among them. The practice itself is an entirely new mode of conversing, drawn together from a range of therapeutic and non-therapeutic practices in cultural life more generally, and orchestrated to achieve effective change.

Communicating with Society

The goal of traditional empirical science to generate knowledge, cut away from issues of its application and dissemination, has implications for its forms of research and communication. On the side of research, there is little interest in listening to the surrounding society in terms of its views or conceptions of the world. To be sure, these views and conceptions may be subject to study, but seldom do they inform (in any direct way) the theory and research themselves. Similarly, in the case of experimental research, researchers are at pains to ensure the "subjects" are not aware of their ideas; nor are subjects' views of why they acted as they did treated seriously. On the side of communication, most scientific books and journals are addressed to fellow scientists, in effect, the enclave of the knowledgeable. Those in the guild who

attempt to translate science for the masses may be discredited for their pecuniary interests and popularization. Thus, the results of the countless hours that may go into a given research study are not transparent to virtually anyone outside the particular guild. Seldom do the "objects of the scientific gaze" learn about the results of such research, nor are they engaged in discussion of the scientist's viewpoint and its implications. The poor, the minorities, the imprisoned, the aged, the deviant, the immigrants, the terrorists, and so on are left "out of the loop." In sum, the outcome is a scientific community largely isolated from society.

This condition stands in sharp contrast to what takes place within the qualitative movement. Partly owing to the loss of foundations of knowledge, the welcoming of all voices and a concern with values, social change, and the relationship between the qualitative community and the surrounding society is far more fluid. There is first an increased sensitivity to the voices outside the science. In terms of research, this sensitivity is manifest in range of qualitative methods that give voice to those outside the halls of science. For example, phenomenology, narrative research, interviewing, psychobiography, and ethnography are all listening as opposed to controlling methods. They take seriously, or accord honor to, the words of the participant. In the case of collaborative and action research, the researcher works side by side with colleagues outside the scientific community.

Turning to communication, the qualitative movement has shown increasing concern with their capacity to reach out to society. In part, this sensitivity results from the abiding societal concerns that drive research endeavors. If the research reaches no one outside the scientific community, its potentials for social transformation are minimal. This sensitivity has also resulted from the increasing charges of elitism in scientific writings, that is, the tendency for highly educated groups of professionals to write only for themselves. Qualitative researchers with a performative orientation are particularly concerned with communicative capacities (Gergen & Gergen, 2012). Such researchers expand exponentially the capacities for relating effectively with the broader society. Not only are multiple forms of writing employed (e.g., short stories, poetry, autobiography), but so, too, is the entire range of

communicative forms, including theater, music, art, dance, photography, multi-media, and more. In this context, questions of audience understanding are paramount. "Who is this for," the scientist asks of his or her pursuits. "Can they take it on?" "Will it be meaningful?" "What can they do with this?" All become significant questions.

Expanding the Vistas of Science

There is a strong tendency within any community to form a consensus about the best or right forms of action, and this is no less the case with scientific communities than others. It is indeed such tendencies—converging around an empiricist view of knowledge—that many view as strangulating the social sciences through its narrow vision of "good science." In contrast, in breaking with the empiricist tradition and residual fundamentalisms, accompanying the emergence of the qualitative movement is a mushrooming of new visions and practices. The development of Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, through four editions in less than two decades, and its continuous addition of new chapters is but one indication. And, with the pluralist posture described earlier, there is a continuous influx of new voices with fresh ideas and insights. The profusion of practices carries with it a clarion call: "Think creatively and expansively about our activities." Further, as the range of practices expands, so does reflection on the nature and potential of inquiry. Age-old concepts of validity, accuracy, and objectivity demand continuous reflection, and new concerns with such issues as responsibility, transparency, and relativity begin to invite debate. In effect, the qualitative movement functions as a continuing catalyst for creative expansion, a continuous testing of the perimeters of possibility.

In Conclusion

If qualitative inquiry fails to achieve more than marginal status within the scientific community at large, its global potentials will be highly delimited. Such has been the case in disciplines such as psychology, in which scientific knowledge has been based on empiricist foundations. However, in recent decades several lines of argument emerged across the scholarly world that leave little if

anything that could otherwise stand as a rational foundation for scientific knowledge. These lines of argument also converge in a promising alternative to empiricism, namely a non-foundational social epistemology. When understood in this constructionist context, we find that the qualitative moment has far more potential to bring about global dialogue and change than anything envisioned in the empiricist tradition. Especially significant are the potentials of qualitative inquiry to bring the world's voices into dialogue, to link research to investments in positive futures, to bring about social change, to generate dialogues between the sciences and society, and to act as a continuous catalyst in expanding the horizons of knowledge.

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