Psychology Faculty Works   Psychology

2018

Qualitative Psychology And The New Pluralism

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Recommended Citation

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In the spring of 2008, Ruthellen Josselson and I addressed the governing Council of the American Psychological Association (APA) with a proposal to launch a new Division of APA. It was to be the division on Qualitative Inquiry. Although supported by a petition with over 1,000 signatures of APA members, our proposal met with stiff resistance. The most prominent critique: Qualitative inquiry is not scientific. In the end, the proposal was defeated. There remained, however, a robust wind in the sails of the qualitative enclave, and soon the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology (SQIP) was formed—outside the APA walls. Then followed long and engaging dialog with APA division heads, with the ultimate outcome that 6 years later SQIP was accepted into one of the most traditionally conservative divisions of APA. That previously named Division on Evaluation, Measurement and Statistics is now the Division on Quantitative and Qualitative Methods. At the invitation of the APA publication wing, the journal *Qualitative Psychology* was launched and now flourishes.

It would be easy enough to dismiss this dramatic turn-around as an institutional adjustment, simply appeasing the discontent of a substantial number of association members. One might also see the entry of qualitative inquiry into American psychology simply as a nod to the possibility that some observations cannot profitably be transformed into numbers. Such explanations would be blind, however, to the sweeping changes taking place across the social sciences. Traditional conceptions of knowledge, objectivity, and the place of values in our undertakings have eroded. The discipline of psychology—with deep roots in traditional conceptions—has simply been more resistant to the transformation. The qualitative movement in psychology now harbors the potential to radically transform the contours of the discipline. Most importantly, the effects of this transformation would vastly expand the contribution of the discipline to society and to the world.

In earlier work (Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015), we have discussed several of these important contributions. These include the enrichment of

theory, the inclusion of minority voices, and interdisciplinary collaboration. However, this discussion did not take sufficient account of one of the most salient characteristics of the qualitative movement, namely its prevailing pluralism. In my view, this pluralist orientation is profound in its transformative potential. Moreover, it adds a significant dimension to the contribution of the movement to the profession and the world. In what follows I wish to explore the dimensions of this pluralism and underscore its particular contributions. This will first require a brief account of the intellectual context from which the qualitative movement gained its force. Here I will focus on the demise of foundationalist philosophy of science and its emerging replacement. I will then center discussion on the emergent pluralism itself. Here we can glimpse the radical range of orientations and assumptions co-existing in the movement. As we shall see, the traditional distinction between quantitative and qualitative research is deeply misleading. Finally, I will discuss positive contributions of this pluralism for the future of psychology.

From Logical Positivism to Social Epistemology

Perhaps the most important contribution to the mushrooming of qualitative inquiry in the social sciences is the demise of foundational philosophy of science and its replacement with a social epistemology. The contemporary emergence of pluralism in qualitative research may be attributed to this same source. To briefly recapitulate, by the early twentieth century the natural sciences had begun to bear visible fruit—harnessing power, curing illnesses, creating weapons, and more. Philosophers took it as a challenge to generate rational foundations for these advances. 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 long-standing philosophic traditions, including both empiricist and rationalist epistemologies, a variety of related accounts emerged. Within many scientific circles, what came to be known as logical positivism served as the received view.

It is this received view that 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 accurate, objective, and systematic accounts of the world. 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 is prediction and control. Political, ideological, and moral values are irrelevant or disruptive to establishing objective knowledge. Methods of research

should ensure that the scientist's accounts realize these ideals. Experimental methods are preferred as they warrant propositions about cause and effect. Standardized measures ensure replicability; large, representative samples lend themselves to broad generalizations; statistics add certainty to such generalizations; and a wide range of controls protect against value biases. On these grounds, qualitative research is a degraded form of inquiry; it fails on virtually all of the above criteria (See also Lamiell, this volume).

Although positivism was controversial even within philosophy itself, its grip began to deteriorate toward the end of the century. Critical analysts first began to illuminate the many ways in which seemingly neutral accounts of the world were ideologically saturated. As Michel Foucault (1978, 1980) proposed, when authoritative claims to knowledge are circulated through the society, they act as invitations to believe. Claims to knowledge function to build and sustain structures of power. A host of literary theorists and rhetoricians were simultaneously exploring the dependency of knowledge claims on the demands of language. As variously demonstrated, scientific accounts are governed by linguistic devices such as metaphor (e.g., Leary, 1994) and narrative (e.g., Gergen & Gergen, 1986).

These two lines of critique—undermining claims to value neutrality and challenging the capacity of language to map the world—set the stage for the emergence of an alternative view of science. Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) is pivotal, and especially his proposal that our propositions about the world are embedded within *paradigms*, roughly a commitment to a perspective and its related methods, assumptions, and practices. Paradigms in turn are created within groups, and represent their negotiated agreements. In effect, what we take to be knowledge is lodged within socially generated perspectives. Scientific truth is only truth for those who share assumptions. This is not to denigrate empirical research, but to remove the right of any group to declare that its truths are universal. We shift from a concern with universal truth to a pragmatic vision of research accomplishments (see Slaney & Tafreshi, this volume) and the empiricist demand that a given account of the world should be accurate with respect to the way the world is. This view has been elaborated and extended by cadres of historians of science and sociologists of knowledge (e.g., Daston & Galison, 2010; Poovey, 1998). These lines of thought are often indexed as social constructionist or constructivist. By the end of the century, one could properly speak of post-foundationalism.

Qualitative Inquiry and the New Pluralism

With the shackles of foundationalist philosophy now removed, and the emerging sensitivity to multiple paradigms, the seeds of change were

planted. Long suppressed minorities in psychology—psychoanalysis, phe-nomenology, and action researchers, among them—gained new adherents. Emerging from the postmodern debates sweeping across the sciences, new forms of inquiry—discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and hermeneutics among them—grew strong. Within neighboring disciplines in the social sciences, where foundations of science had always been shaky, creative experiments in method were burgeoning. These also began to make their way into psychology (see Schiff, this volume). Prior to the hardening of the positivist demands in psychology, there had been broader acceptance of non-experimental research—a soft pluralism. However, within the past two decades, a new pluralism has grown strong (Wertz, 2011). There is a heady sense that a new door has opened, and new horizons of inquiry are there to be explored.

Characterizing the pluralism pervading the qualitative movement is not so simple. One can gain a sense of the rainbow by simply scanning a range of popular research orientations. Included among the most visible are:

Action Research	Grounded Theory
Arts-Based Research	Hermeneutic Analysis
Auto-ethnography	Interviews
Case study	Life History
Collaborative Research	Narrative Analysis
Conversation Analysis	Participant Observation
Discourse Analysis	Phenomenology
Ethnography	Portraiture
Focus Groups	Self-Observation

This is, of course, a practice-based approach to pluralism. It emphasizes the vast range of research methods practiced within the qualitative move-ment. It makes evident the porous boundaries of what may be said to con-stitute the qualitative movement itself. Within the above listing are included practices of a century's duration along with those entering the scene within the past decade; some practices are theoretically focused in their aims, and others used in furthering corporate aims; some are chiefly concerned with social change, while others attempt to illuminate existing conditions; some have emerged in psychology and others borrowed from other disciplines. There is also continuous hybridization. For example, auto-ethnographic research represents a variation on ethnography, but arts-based research-ers have borrowed from auto-ethnography to create performative auto-ethnography. The creative potentials are without clear limits.

How are we then to conceptualize the schools of thought that make up the qualitative movement? The first apparent conclusion is that the traditional

distinction between quantitative and qualitative research is (and possibly always was) misleading if not obfuscating. For one, qualitative researchers can differ dramatically in the assumptions undergirding their work. To lump them, as if they share a particular philosophy of science, is groundless. Indeed, there are many researchers in the qualitative movement who share more with positivist experimentalists than with other qualitative researchers. (For example, many qualitative researchers agree with positivists in their claim to value neutrality, where others in the qualitative camp specifically reject such claims.) Nor can one separate qualitative from quantitative research on the simple grounds that one employs numerical differentiation and the other does not. (Interviews are typically viewed as qualitative, but frequency counts are often used as tools of analysis.) And too, whether a method of research is, or is not, empirical depends on how the researchers understand the method they are employing. For example, if we presume that psychological states are objective realities, then the difference between many quantitative and qualitative researchers is simply in terms of the most adequate method of representation.

In my view, we can a more usefully understand the emerging pluralism by shifting the focus from practices to the varied assumptions underlying these practices. What are the guiding assumptions that legitimize the research practices for their participants? What are the important conceptual suppositions? One might attempt to locate each method with a particular philosophy of science—logical positivism, postpositivism, and social constructionism among them. However, it would be exceedingly difficult in this case to sort the above practices in terms of philosophic school. Some of the practices have emerged within practical settings, without regard to philosophic assumptions. Others have shifted philosophic assumptions over the years. The shift in phenomenological method from a Husserlian to a Heidegerrian base, and the transformation of grounded theory from an empiricist to a constructionist metatheory are illustrative. As an alternative to identifying schools from which practices might seem to allied, it is more useful to single out conceptual lines of demarcation of traditional concern to social science inquiry. This will allow appreciation of the vast range of inquiry now arrayed under the qualitative banner.

Ontological Premises

Perhaps the chief question that may be asked of researchers is what they presume about the nature of the reality to which their research is addressed. As Danziger (1990) has demonstrated, there is a close association between one's methods of research and the associated concept of the person. There are many distinctions to be drawn here, but two overarching differences are

paramount. First, a major dividing line can be drawn between researchers presuming a dualist view of human behavior as opposed to a monist. The former, and more common in qualitative inquiry, assume the existence of an inner or subjective world of experience, intentions, emotion, meaning and the like. Monists, in contrast, either disregard or abandon "mental" reality, and focus their attention on the actions of persons. Thus, for example, in narrative research, a dualist would be concerned with the capacity of an individual's story to reflect or give expression to his or her experience. For the discourse analyst, on the other hand, this dualist concern with an inner world might be replaced by an interest in the function of a given kind of narrative in social interaction or cultural life more generally. Nor do dualists themselves agree on the nature of mental process that is being expressed in one's actions. For example, while many researchers employ interviews to access the opinions, attitudes, values or intentions of the interviewees (all presumed to be accessible to the conscious mind), more psychoanalytically informed interviewers will bracket these concerns with such "superficial" content in search of repressed or unconscious motivation or desire.

A further distinction can be drawn between realists and social constructionists. For the former, the subject matter of inquiry whether personal experience, cognitive categories (on the mental side), or aggression, conversation, or social action (on the side of observable action) has palpable existence in the world. For constructionists, such essentialism is replaced by a concern with the ways in which language creates our understandings of the world. Thus, reality posits are not reflections of the world as it is, but entries into cultural life (for good or ill). It is difficult to discern the orientation of the researcher in this regard, as researchers with a constructionist orientation will make realist claims, understanding full well that the claims are socially contingent and negotiable, and have validity only for those who share traditions of understanding. In general, however, researchers focusing on discourse, conversation, or narrative will tend toward a constructionist orientation. This is owing to their understanding that assumptions about reality have their origins in language.

Epistemological Assumptions

Ontology and epistemology are closely intertwined. However, in the latter case, the focus is on assumptions about the acquisition of knowledge. We shift from what there is to know to how do we know. Most qualitative researchers share a dualist epistemology with their quantitative counterparts. That is, both presume a subject/object dichotomy, with the researcher attempting to report on the state of an independent world. However, major variations then emerge in terms of what is to be reported on and how it is

to be known. We have already touched on the dichotomy between research focused on what is viewed as "publicly observed" behavior in contrast to a "mental world." It is the psychological world that most qualitative researchers place their interest. Yet, it is precisely here that we find wide variations in epistemological assumptions, that is, how can we know "the mind of the other?" Positivists have opted for rational inference, that is, attempting to use multiple methods and measures to triangulate. The early accounts of grounded theory methodology were consistent with this view. More popular within many contemporary circles is to rest conclusions—however tentative—on a process of interpretation. Yet, what is meant by interpretation is also varied. Hermeneuticists drawing from a Gadamerian or textual tradition view interpretation as a circular process of tacking back and forth between conjectures and the particulars of the individual's expression. Phenomenologists from a Hussurlian orientation might train subjects in phenomenological reporting and then search for the structure of the reports. And many narrative analysts simply treat the individual's utterances as direct expressions of his or her subjectivity. For those strongly influenced by the shift toward social epistemology, all of these many variations can be viewed as epistemological practices, realizing the socially contingent character of all epistemic assumptions.

Value Orientation

All practices of inquiry carry with them values, either implicit in the activities or located in their outcomes. The values may be embraced by the researchers who employ a given practice, they may be unconscious, or they may be inferred by others. Thus, for example, those employing experimental methods may embrace the value of value-neutral prediction. Implicitly, however, they are lending themselves to the value of an ordering of the society. Simultaneously, critics may fault the methodology for its power relations, subject-object alienation, and manipulation. In the same way there is enormous variation in the ontological premises across the spectrum of the qualitative movement, so is the pallet of values—articulated, implicit, or inferred—multihued. As many now propose, one cannot separate the pragmatic value of research from its moral, political, and ideological consequences for society (see also Slaney & Tafreshi, this volume).

   This expansion in values is not simply the result of the pluralist spectrum of research practices. Rather, with the demise of positivist foundationalism, the presumption of value-neutral research also waned. As a result, in contrast to the positivist suppression of the values implicit in their research, many qualitative researchers take up a given method precisely for purposes of bettering society in their terms. Many narrative researchers, for example

are deeply sympathetic to the condition of those whose narratives they share. They hope to bring collective attention, for example, to the condition of prisoners, people classified as mentally ill, immigrants, and other marginalized peoples. Critical discourse analysts will use their research to illuminate prejudices implicit in common language use, or the incoherence of a problematic political party. Participatory action research gained its very prominence in its efforts to achieve social justice.

In sum, there are no overarching ontological agreements, epistemological assumptions, set of values, or conception of research goals that unite the various endeavors now constituting the qualitative movement in psychology. Rather, we find multiplicities in each case and an open door to hybrids and new creations. In the past, researchers were generally confronted with a fixed and narrow set of scientifically acceptable methods. The challenge was to shoe-horn one's conceptual or empirical concerns into one of the sanctioned options. With the qualitative explosion, researchers may now ask themselves, "What kind of practice will best allow us to achieve our ends?" If there is no obvious "method" available for the purposes, one is free to create.

It is of special importance that in the context of the new pluralism, there is a marked absence of attempts to elevate any given orientation over the other, or to undermine or disqualify the alternatives. There appears to be an abiding recognition that there are multiple perspectives in play, and there is no means of valorizing one over another, save through selecting one perspective among many. Illustrative of this live and let live orientation is the Wertz et al. (2011) volume featuring five qualitative orientations to a single case. The contributors each demonstrate the potentials inherent in their research practice, but with no attempt to compete or diminish the alternatives. In a further sign of pluralist affinity, the subject of their collective research was also invited to join the dialog.

The Potentials of Pluralism

For the better part of the past century, psychological research has been tied to a vision of science in which the chief goal of research is to enhance prediction and control. The extent to which such an orientation has contributed to society is a subject of continuous debate. Testing abstract hypotheses is problematic, as there are no means of deriving from the abstract formulations predictions useful in any particular or unique case. A thousand experiments on dissonance reduction, for example, tell us little or nothing about people's behavior in any particular setting. Further, behavior patterns undergo continuous change, with digital technology continuously increasing the rate of change. If there were useful predictions of behavior today,

they might be grossly misleading in terms of the challenges of tomorrow. As these debates continue, the new pluralism brings with it new goals of inquiry. The potentials of psychological research are resultantly expanded. Here I touch on three significant alternatives emerging from the qualitative movement.

Expanding Dimensions of Understanding

The positivist orientation to research is ideally designed to yield a single answer to questions it confronts. Because one presumes that nature is singular in its composition (we are not dealing with multiple realities), there are single, best answers as to its character. As Popper (1968) reasoned, we move closer to the truth about nature as research discards those accounts that fail to describe and predict. At the same time, in psychology, one can scarcely locate any hypotheses that have been satisfactorily discarded in this way. And too, from the standpoint of a social epistemology, singular accounts are viewed with suspicion. What nature is does not demand any (or any one) account of its nature. As we increase the range of understandings, our attention is directed in different ways; we see potentials not available before; we are alerted to outcomes otherwise suppressed.

Thus, as we expand the range of research practices, the dimensions of understanding are enriched. If we were concerned with poverty, an empirically driven study of the brain mechanisms particular to impoverished persons would be severely limited. Narrative research would vastly expand our understanding of their everyday lives. A network analysis could illuminate possible support clusters; participant observation could provide insider's insights into daily life details; action researchers could support initiatives for change and thus teach us about what can be done; and survey research might provide an indicator of the modal concerns, fears, needs, and hopes.

Opening Options for Action

It is but a short leap from understanding to action. As our frames of understanding increase, so do we locate new possibilities for action—for support, intervention, social change, policy formation, and so on. With a single answer to research about the poor, for example, we are left with but a handful of possible actions. If neurological research suggested that the brain area for hope was rarely stimulated, we might draw the conclusion that the poor were simply hard wired for this way of life, or that brain stimulation efforts would be required. Narrative researchers might elicit the kind of social concern that stimulates support programs; when support clusters are illuminated, social workers might be moved to devote special attention to

collaborative efforts. The participant observer could point to small details, such as the lack of heat, light, and electricity. The results of survey researchers might be interesting to policymakers in directing attention to specific issues in employment, drugs, or schools. Action researchers could teach us from their efforts how community organizing might change the situation. And focus groups could help to expand the imagination on what may be done.

Stimulating Ethical Reflection

Positivist foundationalism is often viewed as a child of cultural modernism more generally. Central to this Zeitgeist was an attempt to bring about a productive and satisfying social order though reason and observation. Cultural modernism thus resists religious, spiritual, and philosophic movements committed to any tradition of values. Value commitments are, for the positivist, "subjective." And as reasoned, there is no means of deriving "oughts" from the careful analysis and observation of what is the case. Value-based actions should be abandoned in favor of scientific analysis, as major world conflicts are triggered by value differences. In effect, for positivists there was (and is) a pervasive resistance to value assertions and dialogs on the good.

Yet, as many critics have argued, cultural modernism has left the culture bereft of resources for ethical deliberation. As one might say of positivist foundationalism, "ethically speaking, anything goes." As described, the qualitative movement brings with it a re-invigoration of values. Vibrant enclaves within psychology now unabashedly represent, for example, feminist, LGBTQ, environmentalist, Latino, indigenous, African American, humanist, socialist, anti-psychiatry, and anti-colonialist standpoints. Ushered into presence by the movement is an invaluable sensitivity to the ethical/ideological dimensions of research. Reflection on research moves beyond the traditional confinement to methods and results to the ethical and political consequences. This respect for value-based reflection carries over, as well, into the classroom.

These three potentials—for expanding the dimensions of understanding, increasing options for action, and stimulating ethical reflection—scarcely exhaust the contribution of the new pluralism to both psychology and its publics. One might also point to the ways in which many forms of inquiry—especially in the arts-based and narrative domains—speak to non-professional audiences in ways never before available. As well, with its abandonment of the positivist efforts to fortify abstract laws, qualitative researchers direct their attention to important areas of societal concern. Not only is there a greater contribution to society, but the relationship of the discipline to society

also shifts from academic isolation to dialog. There are many reasons to hope that the new pluralism signifies a major transformation of the discipline.

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