



10-1-1995

Qualitative Research from a Batesonian Lens

Muriel Singer

Nova Southeastern University, muriel@ssss.nova.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Singer, M. (1995). Qualitative Research from a Batesonian Lens. *The Qualitative Report*, 2(2), 1-6.
<https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/1995.2063>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.

The advertisement features a dark blue background on the left with the text "Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate" in white, followed by the tagline "Indulge in Culture" in a script font. Below this, it says "Exclusively Online • 18 Credits" and a "LEARN MORE" button. The NSU logo is also present. On the right, a photograph shows six people sitting on a stone ledge with "NOVA SOUTHEASTERN" inscribed on it.

Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate
Indulge in Culture
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits
LEARN MORE

NSU
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

Qualitative Research from a Batesonian Lens

Keywords

qualitative research

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Qualitative Research as Seen From a Batesonian Lens

by Muriel Singer

The Qualitative Report, Volume 2, Number 2, October, 1995

As a third year doctoral student at Nova Southeastern University's Department of Family Therapy, I am moving perilously close to the threshold of my dissertation. Although I have known and hoped that my education would eventually lead to this esteemed circumstance, I stand here now, dismayed and trembling. I wonder if I have really absorbed enough vital information to embark on this monumental task, and how to go about applying my accumulated learning to the slippery process of research.

Nova's family therapy program is strongly influenced by several systemic models of theory and practices that credit Gregory Bateson with providing the epistemological foundation and language for their theories (Andersen, 1991; Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffman, & Penn, 1987; White & Epston, 1990). In the past few years, I have tried to embody both the letter and spirit of Bateson's thinking in my work as a therapist, and I feel that many of his ideas have also enriched me as a person, as well. At this point, I find myself struggling to figure out how my Bateson way of knowing can now guide me in research. In this essay, I am going to discuss the ways in which I think a Batesonian process might inform my dissertation.

Bateson stressed the roles of information and relationship in all levels of science, from genetics and human culture, to the pathology of schizophrenia. He maintained that scientific inquiry begins with both data and fundamentals and that without these crucial fundamentals, explanation is not possible and science cannot advance. Bateson looked for clues to these "eternal verities" in the enduring patterns and forms that are found and repeated throughout nature. He then applied these explanatory principles to a variety of contexts, juxtaposing different ideas in the belief that "the same types of mental operation which are useful in analyzing one field may be useful in another" (Bateson, 1972, p. 74).

Bateson moved about laterally. He worked by connecting patterns and relationships abductively and linking ideas within a confluence of different circles in order to discover the logical extension of related constructs. He reasoned that the starting point of science could not be induction. Things cannot be empirically verified by experience. As Bateson (1972) explains, "No man has ever seen or experienced formless and unsorted matter; just as no man has ever seen or experienced a random event" (Bateson, 1972, p. xxv). To perceive disorder, you have to order. Bateson (1972) preferred the notion that "in scientific research you start from two beginnings, each of which has its own kind of authority; the observations cannot be denied, and the fundamentals must be fitted. You must achieve a sort of pincer's maneuver" (p. xx).

The most fundamental of Bateson's principles is the difference that exists between living and non-living things and the essential feature connecting all living things is the capacity for mental process. Bateson viewed an ecology of mind as being vital to any coherent science. According to

Bochner (1981), "Bateson treated data inventively, not to verify preconceptions but to create post-conceptions. The data is aimed at developing a mental picture - a mind" (p. 71).

Bateson described mind as the organization and interaction of multiple parts. He viewed the world as being joined together by mental events. A brain does not think by itself, it interacts. Likewise, research is an active process. We do not collect data, we interact with it. When things enter into the system of information, we enter into mind. When we map non-living things, we bring them into the world of the living. Bateson did not look for truth in concrete entities or events. If there is any truth to be had, it is within this network of interconnecting parts.

According to Bateson, the interaction between the parts of the mind is triggered by difference. All knowing has to do with discrimination and all learning is predicated on detecting and acting upon differences. Mental process involves locating differences and creating categories in order to make sense of information. The differences we perceive are located in the relationship between things rather than within things. As Bateson (1991) explains, "The primary data of experience are differences. From these data we construct our hypothetical (always hypothetical) ideas and pictures of the external world" (p. 188).

Bateson deduced that the individual can never encounter the world as it actually is. We do not have access to the territory, as such, but only to maps of the territory and our descriptions are part of that map. There are innumerable characteristics or data contained in any event or entity. We can never choose all the distinctions to put on a map or to include in our research. In our daily lives, we systematically select certain differences from a vast array of sights, smells, and sounds to enter into the circuit of transformation and become information. In research, we also strive to bring some order and meaning to a large collection of data in order to make sense of it. This search for meaning generates structure, patterns, and categories. Every image we encounter requires coding and mapping. There is no such thing as true knowledge or a real picture of the world that is independent of any knower. There is always a blend of the phenomena and the way in which one distinguishes it. One doesn't cause the other to have meaning. They have meaning together, in relationship to each other. Differences are not present in things without the presence of a living organism to recognize that difference.

Bateson stressed this idea that data are not events or objects but are always records of descriptions or memories of events or objects. "Always there is a transformation or recording of the raw event which intervenes between the scientist and the object. In a strict sense, therefore, no data are truly "raw," and every record has been somehow subjected to editing and transformation " (Bateson, 1972, p. xviii). There is an infinite line of separation between a moment or event and one's perception of that event. We can never capture or possess a moment. Reality is not palpable. It is impossible for language to be adequate to the phenomena. We can only scan it and attempt to convey its vitality. What we have is the facsimile of expression or a representation of reality. Something is lost and gained in every representation. The phenomena itself escapes us.

This contrasts sharply with traditional scientific research in which events are seen as being caused by forces and impacts. Bateson considered the laws of energy and matter to be inappropriate for the description of communication and ideas because a quantitative form of

description does not match the described. He thought that quantification was a way of avoiding pattern and context. Bateson did not believe that things could be objectively observed and measured because observations demands involvement. Information is not a material thing. Information is relative to how I operate on what is out there. It is the researcher who must supply the thought and energy that is needed to decipher any information. Bateson concluded that in the world of mental process, there are not real things, only messages carried by things. "The messages contained in events and objects are not transferred to us like energy, but are transformed by us. Thus, explanations must center not on events and objects themselves but on relations between them" (Bochner, 1981, p. 74).

From a Batesonian perspective, it is the way we classify, make distinctions, and make sense of things that is fundamental. If it is the distinctions we ourselves make that are causes, then it is how we process information and map the territory that explains. Within this framework, any explanation or scientific activity becomes fundamentally recursive. It follows that if the world of mental process is recursive, then our descriptions of it should also be recursive and address the multiple layers of mutual influence in any relationship. Once it is understood that recursiveness is fundamental to the development of a science of human interacting systems, "the focus of explanation shifts from the world of matter to the world of form" (Bochner, 1981, p. 74). There are always different orders of recursion and different ways of slicing things up. Every picture can tell a multiplicity of stories.

Bateson believed that we should look for explanations in the ever larger units, rather than in the sort of microscopic reduction that constitutes explanations in the non-distinguishing world of physical things. He always called attention to the primacy of context in establishing meaning and to the multiple levels of meanings in any interaction. "In fact, the phenomenon of context and the closely related phenomenon of meaning defined a division between the hard sciences and this sort of science which I was trying to build" (Bateson, 1972, p. xvii). He proposed that "it is not the data itself that is important, but the process of mulling it over, loosely and then in great detail" (Bochner, 1981, p. 72). Bateson emphasized the importance of being as precise as possible, but never closing off any possibilities. He cautioned researchers not to end their research too early and stressed the value of knowing where one's knowledge starts off and leaves off. When ideas are half-baked, he advised tying a knot in a handkerchief as a reminder "that the concepts behind them are vague and await analysis" (Bateson, 1972, p. 84).

Since an observer always participates in what is observed, all statements by observers embody a self-reflexive component. It is the observer who punctuates events in research. Our labels and categories say as much about us as that which we are classifying. Research plans and methods are primarily determined by the researcher's opinions and assumptions about what sort of thing he is dealing with, so it follows that part of research should be to study the nature and process of research itself. If it is me as the researcher who is the primary instrument, it is important for me to examine how I participate in the observed since my own frame of reference will heavily guide what I choose to present as significant. Since I cannot analyze data as representing some objective state of events, research becomes a task of examining what I am doing to construct a particular representation of reality. My methodology becomes a reflection or discussion about my own epistemology or way of knowing, and what I as a researcher believe can be known, as well as who can be a knower.

Bateson (1987) defined epistemology as the "science that studies the process of knowing -- the interaction of the capacity to respond to differences on the one hand, with the material world in which those differences somehow originate on the other" (p. 20). He was interested in how the observer observes and how we are able to make distinctions and distinguish between our distinctions. He believed in enlarging the view of science as a dialogical paradigm in which the observer is revealed in his descriptions. In my research, it will be important to me to include how I am positioning my epistemological orientation, and to figure out how this invites particular understandings of the questions I ask, as well as the responses I receive.

In every research project, in any set of circumstances, there are always choices of how to participate in the situation. Whenever I make a choice, I commit myself to a broader category that encompasses that choice. Every question I pose and every quote I transcribe involve decisions within the arena of ethics and aesthetics. Bateson cautioned us to take responsibility for our choices and the way we elect to participate in life. The questions I ask as a researcher are informed by certain premises and presuppose certain beliefs, and to an extent, shape the answers I find. If I'm looking for certain things, it follows that I'm marginalizing other things. My identity as the researcher is an important component of the method, and this identity should be shared to contextualize the research in much the same way as the literature review serves to contextualize the research question.

I am hopeful that I will be able to apply many of Bateson's ecosystemic ideas to the task of my upcoming dissertation. First and foremost, he awakened me to the need to always think about the nature of how things fit or do not fit together. I have learned that it is important to be as explicit as possible about my sensemaking process as a way of narrowing the gap between my thoughts and what I am writing in the text. I think it is crucial to articulate what I am doing and to be clear about what level of phenomenon I am addressing. Bateson has made me aware of the value of trying to understand my understanding and of being mindful of how I am drawing distinctions and the consequences of my punctuation. It is the use of information about information that is characteristic of multiple level hierarchies and as a researcher, I want to understand the logical typing of my own ideas. If there is literature I have to understand, then I have to figure out how I am understanding it. What is a particular article telling me? Do I disagree with it or connect with it? What perspective do I want to take? How am I defining my ideas in relationship to other ideas in the field? How does my thinking relate to the thinking that is expressed in other texts? What other constructions are there out there? What is the point that I'm trying to make? How can my text accurately capture my ideas? Is every relevant voice reflected in my text? Is it my prerogative to alter or summarize someone else's words? How much latitude should I take in filling in the blanks? Am I authorized to tell another person's story? Does the relationship between the observed and the description that I'm conveying resonate? How can I increase the faithfulness and authenticity of my replication? What are the repercussions or consequences of my research upon the participants? Can I juxtapose the method and lens in looking at another aspect of the phenomena. And finally, if I really think that there is no truth to be had and that no perspective is more valid than another, do I run the risk of becoming as disengaged and distant as I would be in seeking objectivity?

Bateson believed that all learning involves trial and error. I am hoping, for my sake, that being muddled and confused is an important step in reaching the next level of clarity. This might

persuade me to talk openly about mistakes I might be making and problems I might have in sorting through my data and analyzing it. It might be helpful to articulate my confusion and the changes my research and I go through as my ideas evolve and mutate, and I learn new things along the way.

Bateson encouraged a combination of loose and strict thinking. He believed that scientific advancement requires both rigor and imagination. He described how this double habit of mind led him "into wild hunches and at the same time compelled more formal thinking about those hunches" (Bateson, 1972, p. 75). Bateson defined his epistemology as "inductive and experimental and, like any true science, it is deductive and, above all, abductive seeking to put side by side similar chunks of phenomena (Bateson, 1991, p. 232). He was always looking to extend the territory into new areas, looking to open up new lines of thought and to amplify our understanding beyond what we knew before. He disciplined himself to see metaphors and make comparisons in all realms of living and thinking. He brought one view to a different location to see what it looked like there, allowing new themes and ideas to ripen along the way.

Gregory Bateson introduced us to a method of classifying the phenomena of pattern. In his searching he found ways of knowing that revealed intricate patterns as astounding as those that show up stained in tissue slices. He was a scientist who preferred the cooked to the raw. He showed me that in research it is the peeling, the simmering, the steaming, and basting that can turn raw data into a truly gourmet meal. Although, as far as I can tell, Bateson always left his research hungry.

References

Andersen, T. (Ed.), with Katz, A., Lax, W. D., Davidson, J., & Lussardi, D. J. (1991). *The reflecting team: Dialogues and dialogues about the dialogues*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*. New York: Ballantine.

Bateson, G. (1987). Conventions of communication: Where validity depends upon belief. In J. Ruesch & G. Bateson, *Communication: The social matrix of psychiatry* (pp. 212-227). New York: Norton.

Bateson, G. (1991). *A sacred unity: Further steps to an ecology of mind*. (R. Donaldson, Ed.). New York: Harper Collins.

Bochner, A. (1981). Forming warm ideas. In C. Wilder-Mott & J. H. Weakland (Eds.), *Rigor and imagination: Essays from the legacy of Gregory Bateson* (pp. 65-75). New York: Praeger.

Boscolo, L., Cecchin, G., Hoffman, L., & Penn, P. (1987). *Milan systemic therapy: Conversations in theory and practice*. New York: Basic Books.

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Muriel Singer is a doctoral student in the Department of Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 33314, USA. Her e-mail address is muriel@ssss.nova.edu
