

2-23-2009

Bringing Together a Community of Voices to Debate a Growing Challenge: A Review of Qualitative Inquiry and the Politics of Evidence

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Recommended APA Citation

Wulff, D. (2009). Bringing Together a Community of Voices to Debate a Growing Challenge: A Review of Qualitative Inquiry and the Politics of Evidence. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 46-49. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2009.2826>

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Bringing Together a Community of Voices to Debate a Growing Challenge: A Review of Qualitative Inquiry and the Politics of Evidence

Abstract

Editors Norman Denzin and Michael Giardina bring together a collection of leading voices from the Third International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry to explore political, social, and methodological contexts of what constitutes evidence in qualitative research and suggest a diversification of evidential criteria. The book also demonstrates the community-building abilities scholarly journals can have in networking together peers and colleagues from around the world to contemplate, discuss, and debate critical issues such as those raised in this text.

Keywords

Qualitative Inquiry, Qualitative Research, Methodological Conservatism

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Bringing Together a Community of Voices to Debate a Growing Challenge: A Review of *Qualitative Inquiry and the Politics of Evidence*

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Editors Norman Denzin and Michael Giardina bring together a collection of leading voices from the Third International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry to explore political, social, and methodological contexts of what constitutes evidence in qualitative research and suggest a diversification of evidential criteria. The book also demonstrates the community-building abilities scholarly journals can have in networking together peers and colleagues from around the world to contemplate, discuss, and debate critical issues such as those raised in this text. Key Words: Qualitative Inquiry, Qualitative Research, and Methodological Conservatism

Traditionally scholarly journals emerged from learned societies' efforts to systematically collect and circulate the latest discoveries and innovations emanating from the community of colleagues (Bishop, 1984). Contemporarily, scholarly journals can create communities of their own as their editors, editorial boards, authors, and readers create social networks of consumers world-wide who appreciate the ideas and results shared globally via the internet and other digital media. This pattern has been taken one step further as editors and publishers have launched face-to-face conferences which bring together these journal-generated communities to put faces to the names, to enjoy the company of each other, to learn of the latest developments, and to make connections and collaborative relationships.

Norman Denzin, the long time co-editor with Yvonna Lincoln of *Qualitative Inquiry*, has been one of leaders in creating communities from his scholarly journal associates. The International Association of Qualitative Inquiry (IAQI; <http://www.c4qi.org/iaqi/home.html>) was formed as a logical extension of the constituencies who had been brought together by the pages of *Qualitative Inquiry*, and the series of Sage qualitative research handbooks, co-edited by Denzin and Lincoln. Starting in 2005 the IAQI has sponsored a congress (<http://www.icqi.org/>) which brings together qualitative and critical inquirers from around the world for debates, dialogues, and the opportunity to connect with each other.

Just as the journal begat the conference, the conference has now begat its own scholarly journal, Left Coast Press' International Review of Qualitative Research (<http://www.lcoastpress.com/journal.php?id=8>), and associated texts. In the third of these books, an outgrowth of presentations from the Third International Conference of Qualitative Inquiry held in May of 2007 in Champaign/Urbana, Illinois entitled *Qualitative Inquiry and the Politics of Evidence* (2006), editors Denzin and Michael Giardina have assembled a variety of authors who examine the issue of evidence in substantively interesting ways. All are decidedly opinionated, but support what they say with rationale, detail, or illustration. The breadth of points-of-view and ideas expressed in this book suggests that the conference must have been quite extraordinary.

Denzin and Giardina set the tone for this work in their introduction that opens fire on the scientific cartel:

Global efforts to impose a new orthodoxy on critical social science inquiry must be resisted—a hegemonic politics of evidence cannot be allowed. (p. 38)

The unapologetic tone set by the editors is refreshing given that many research textbooks and some qualitative textbooks tend to sidestep any overt criticism of the scientific discourse. This is not to necessarily say that science should be exorcised from social *science*, but rather that some strong advocates of qualitative or interpretive inquiry are welcome in the field and to academia in general. Our collective timidity in our local contexts to stand up for our principles and our methods of inquiry is a sad testimony to either our lack of courage or, perhaps even more alarmingly, our own lack of understanding of what we do. This second point beckons us to be better interrogators of our own views and methods—to be the most serious critics of what we do. Perhaps if we took up the mantel of being our own critics with more zest and probing, we would not struggle with the criticisms that come from without (and we may be a little kinder in doing it to boot!).

While this collection of chapters falls under one book heading (the editors' Introduction, 12 chapters, and a Coda), each chapter will bump you into an alternative set of ideas. The editors organize the book into three sections: Policy *Intentions*, Theoretical and Methodological *Interruptions*, and Performative *Interventions*. I have italicized the second word of each section title because they conjure up different images with the first word of each of the categories—policy, theory and method, and the performative. Each “I-word” emphasizes how all these domains are energized or enlivened. Rather than outline *policies*, the chapters in this section ground new contexts of thinking that bring forth new practices; rather than outline theories and methodologies, these chapters create pauses and alternative pathways; and instead of displays or self-contained presentations, these chapters clearly attempt to do something—to make a difference. The action-orientation of this book is evident from start to finish.

While each chapter stands on its own and is worthy of comment, I will offer some comments on some aspects of a few chapters that were particularly noteworthy to me as reviewer.

Harry Torrance encourages us to see qualitative inquiry as “oriented toward risk taking and the production of new knowledge, including the generation of new questions (some of which may derive from active engagement with research respondents and policymakers), rather than supplication, risk aversion, and *the production of limited data on effectiveness for system maintenance (what works)*” (pp. 73-74). This last reference to studying “what works” as a form of system maintenance is particularly distressing given the prevalence (and public and professional valuing) of these sorts of studies. The widely accepted view that studying “what works” is unquestioningly a good thing may be luring many into participating in inquiry and projects whose supporting logic is to maintain what is. How often do we examine the discourse of “what works”?

In “A Fine Line,” Julianne Cheek asserts that the practice sought by “inquirers-in-training” “is as much about learning how to navigate the politics of research as it is about learning methods” (p. 127). She invites us to engage with the politics and develop our skills in designing and promoting our inquiry practices, rather than simply lamenting our predicament. She does not suggest any selling out of ideas or principles, but rather to use our systemic and

political understandings of “how things get done” and use them. We need to “do our homework” and find ways to enact our inquiries. A mentor of mine in the field of family therapy, Harry Goolishian, once provided an apt metaphor for doing family therapy that I think applies here. Imagine yourself to be a catfish in a farm pond. The water is murky, your eyesight is poor—keep moving slowly, when you sense you are bumping into something, slowly adjust your course around it and keep moving. The moral is to keep moving and not get overly distracted or hurt by “obstacles,” which could probably better be considered to be “signposts” along the way that can indicate to you which ways to go and which ways not to go. Cheek seems to suggest a similarly pragmatic approach.

David Altheide makes the case that evidence is interactionist or relational: “. . . information and facts are not the same as evidence; what matters is what is accepted as facts-for-the-purpose-at-hand” (p. 143). Evidence is a negotiated understanding rather than a fixed entity whose presence is material and universal. Understanding evidence as a contextualizing of information and facts allows us to consider the beneficiaries of certain notions of what is evidence from those who are not beneficiaries (and may even be harmed by certain constructions). Defining and using evidence becomes inherently political—it can no longer be considered innocent.

Joseph Maxwell takes up a realist position and examines the viability of causality in qualitative inquiry. He invites the reader to take a clear-eyed look at some topics that he/she perhaps has summarily dismissed. The breadth of qualitative inquiry sometimes becomes submerged in the pursuit of one’s own preferred form of qualitative inquiry, but it is this very breadth that grounds all qualitative inquiries as legitimate inquiry. Maxwell’s chapter reminds us of this.

Patti Lather always challenges us to turn things around and she does not disappoint here. Lather generously weaves authors and works in a tapestry that alternatively clarifies and mystifies, helps the reader find him/herself and then lose him/herself. We would be hard pressed to find an author who better reminds us of the complex of messy crossings consistently inherent in living.

Jan Morse, Linda Niehaus, Stanley Varnhagen, Wendy Austin, and Michele McIntosh assert that a large component of risk emerges in qualitative research unexpectedly and the onus is on the researcher for its mediation. Traditional Institutional Review Board (IRB) risk management systems use a priori protocols in an effort to protect study participants from harm however most risks that may emerge, happen “along the way” of the study and cannot be successfully predicted ahead of time. The traditional a priori system fails to provide credible risk management and the authors recommend that other models of oversight be developed for qualitative research studies. This argument has far-reaching implications for how qualitative researchers should be prepared for doing participant interviews. How often have you heard that IRB assessments of risk were inadequate to the task? This was a very thought-provoking chapter that has direct bearing on educational programs interested in providing the highest level of training for qualitative researchers.

In sum, *Qualitative Inquiry and the Politics of Evidence* is well worth the read—it has something for everybody. It is thought-provoking and useful. This is the only book of this series I have read and based upon this reading experience, I will check out the other volumes from the previous International Congresses (see Left Coast Press at http://www.lcoastpress.com/books_author.php?id=203 for the other titles in this series).

While some of the authors of chapters in this book were previously known to me, I particularly enjoyed reading some of the chapters written by persons who I have not heretofore known. Showcasing the work of lesser-known authors may be one of the most significant contributions of this book and the International Congresses to the growth and articulation of what qualitative inquiry means (and can mean) in this emerging worldwide community.

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Author Note

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Article Citation

- Wulff, D. (2009). *The Weekly Qualitative Report*, 2(8), 46-49. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/WQR/denzin.pdf>
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