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Access to Qualitative Inquiry: An Internal Dialogue

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Abstract

Based on the theme of the TQR 15th Annual Conference – “Qualitative Inquiry; Access Denied?” this article introspectively examines through a self-interview what I have learned and experienced and my “evolution” in relation to qualitative inquiry. My journey began firmly in the quantitative/rationalistic camp, and I now find myself midway between this camp and the qualitative/naturalistic camp. Is this an integrated space that provides a home to practice mixed methods and a more natural and authentic way to go about discovery and learning?

Keywords

qualitative inquiry, quantitative inquiry, paradigms, reflection

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Acknowledgements

TQR for the doors it has opened for me for the past 15 years!

Access to Qualitative Inquiry: An Internal Dialogue

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Based on the theme of the TQR 15th Annual Conference – “Qualitative Inquiry; Access Denied?” this article introspectively examines through a self-interview what I have learned and experienced and my “evolution” in relation to qualitative inquiry. My journey began firmly in the quantitative/rationalistic camp, and I now find myself midway between this camp and the qualitative/naturalistic camp. Is this an integrated space that provides a home to practice mixed methods and a more natural and authentic way to go about discovery and learning?

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Introduction

We believe that qualitative inquiry and training should be accessible to anyone anywhere because of its significant potential to transform our worlds.

This quote was taken from *The Qualitative Report* (TQR) Website, Call for Paper and Presentations (February 29, 2024-March 1, 2024). While I assume this provocative statement was aimed at uncovering obstacles to achieving this goal that are external to the individual, this reflection seeks to explore obstacles within the individual based on an interview with the author. This reflective piece will be presented by posing questions from Self 1 (Participant Researcher) to Self 2 (Researcher Participant) in the hope that it will spur not only thoughts that may be found useful to readers but will also spur real time learning within the researcher/participant. I chose the terms “participant researcher” and “researcher participant” to convey that the former will serve as the primary researcher who has an insider view while the latter will serve as the primary informant who also shares insider knowledge. These terms may be somewhat confusing but it’s the best I can do to try to explain the dialogue that follows. There are questions that the researcher will ask the participant with what he hopes is an “objective” mindset but is an admixture of objectivity and subjectivity—after all, I, the writer, am both the PR and the RP!

PR: So, tell me a little bit about yourself and why you chose to interpret this conference theme in the way that you did?

RP: Thanks for asking! Let me start out by talking about my fascination with the oath that witnesses take in the American court system when they are asked, “Do you swear to tell the *truth*, the *whole truth*, and *nothing but the truth* so help you God?” I italicized the variants of truth because they really seem to capture it all—very little room to not tell the truth—at least our “perception” of the truth. And I think it is that term “perception” that seems to capture the essence of what qualitative inquiry is all about and how we humans process sensory information and interpret these sensory data through a series of filters including but not limited

to conceptual, emotional, experiential, genetic, philosophical, physical, pragmatic, religious, and societal; that is, qualitative inquiry recognizes that we are first human and second everything else, including seekers of truth. And so, please keep that in mind as this interview proceeds.

PR: Wow, you sure took a whack at the ontological, epistemological, and what-have-you! So, to take a “deeper dive” (modern parlance) into what you have said, what the heck did you mean by that somewhat obtuse response?

RP: Well first, let me reflect a bit about language – I tend to think about the contextual/peripheral first so you will have to excuse me. I recognize that you (and others) will perceive this as “beating around the bush” but again I take refuge behind my ironclad proposition that I’m a human being (just like you) and so you are going to have to bear with me and perhaps even come to appreciate all my/our unique beingness! Anyhow, when we use “50 cent words” (a longer word or words used to describe a simple idea such as ontological and epistemological as well as a host of other terms), I think that we tend to move away from the concrete to a higher level of abstraction. This movement is indeed a hallmark of scholarly writing and discourse but sometimes I think that the more esoteric language becomes the more we may become disassociated with the feelings and thoughts behind them. I think that is why Jesus used parables and why I find witty sayings as well as bumper stickers resonating more with how I feel/think about something. OK—enough sermonizing and back to your question—sorry what was the question that you asked?

PR: Just scroll up!

RP: OK—got it! I guess that it is first important to talk a little bit about my background in relation to quantitative versus qualitative inquiry. I use the term “versus” because of the mostly unconscious conflict that I had when I was in my doctoral program in the early 1990s which often surfaced as muttering to myself which Lev Vygotsky referred to as “private speech” (Vygotsky, 1987). I wonder how many people are interested in the following which may be perceived as an egotistical story, so I’ll make it short. For those who might be interested in a fuller version you can see Bernauer (2012). In a nutshell, I was “trained” (not educated; see Bruner, 1966) in quantitative methods and thought about those who practiced qualitative inquiry (if I thought about them at all) as poor souls who simply could not handle numbers and statistics. Reflecting, I thought that the right thing to do was give them their space and let them do whatever they did while also dismissing anything they said or wrote as “sentimental hogwash” (as spoken by Mr. Potter the heartless banker in the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life”). After I finished my doctoral training, I went on to teach at a university and taught statistical procedures to doctoral students. Frankly, in retrospect, I was a bad teacher. Why? Because instead of teaching students, I taught the subject of statistical procedures as if my students were simply disconnected brains sitting on desks and it was entirely up to them whether they learned anything or even if they cared about this subject. While this is a story for another day, let me point to the work of Cooper and Garner (2012) in which they persuasively point out that the “Three Rs” of teaching should be Caring-Relevance-Rigor—in that order. Unfortunately, in my early days teaching I emphasized rigor rather than the other two attributes which

I attribute to the quantitative mystique under which I was trained. Since that was about 30 years ago, I have worked hard to implement the Three Rs and try to be open to new ways of improving my pedagogy which I think of as more of an art than a science.

PR: So, ... “not to beat a dead horse,” what about your response related to truth, the justice system, perceptions, and the “filters” you mentioned (conceptual, emotional, experiential, genetic, philosophical, physical, pragmatic, religious, and societal)? Remember that?

RP: I like your persistence in trying to unravel the layers of my story. Well, I guess that when we write and reflect we must remember that we are “re-storying” (c.f., Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) our experiences because life and learning are forever moving, mutating, and perhaps evolving, in other words, the train is always moving even when we are asleep and so as we relate or write about where we were and where we are—we are at the same time still rolling along on the train while consciously as well as unconsciously taking in the new scenery and integrating these real-time experiences into our story based on the filters that you pointed out.

PR: Aha ...so, where does that leave us in relation to the whole focus of this thing which is to remind you that “we believe that qualitative inquiry and training should be accessible to anyone anywhere because of its significant potential to transform our worlds.”

RP: Well, first, I think that I am now a semi-transformed individual in terms of my perspectives regarding qualitative inquiry which certainly shows you how that train kept rolling along! However, when I think about the challenges of my own *accessibility* to qualitative inquiry, I suppose it was culturally imposed as a practical consequence of the environment where I found myself during my doctoral studies. As alluded to above, I was ensconced in an environment that looked at phenomena almost exclusively through a quantitative lens. And I might add, I am not sorry about this experience; in fact, I am grateful.

PR: Wait! You say that you are grateful for being “ensconced” (your term) in an environment with a quantitative mindset and yet here you are writing about a conference (*TQR*) where folks are all about qualitative inquiry. I think you need to elaborate a bit!

RP: You want to “drill down” do you? But yes, I reckon I should explore this phenomenon of gratitude and gratefulness. First, I think underneath it all, I had (and probably still have) this split-dimension about me (that should resonate with both of us); on the one hand I seem to inherently like order and the exactitude that numbers represent while also recognizing that in the field of pedagogy (that I gravitated towards), that the best teachers that I had in high school all the way to doctoral studies exhibited characteristics that are more akin to qualities rather than quantities, even if they taught quantitative subjects such as statistics.

PR: Well now that sounds interesting, can you give an example?

RP: Why certainly my friend—may I call you my friend?

PR: Sure!

RP: Well, what first comes to mind is my high school German teacher and my doctoral statistics teacher. Now although German is not a quantitative subject, what is important here is how my teacher, Bob Hickey, first connected with me and my classmates while also maintaining a rigorous approach to learning, that is, he maintained the three Rs—Relationships-Relevance-Rigor sequence (Cooper & Garner, 2012). While learning a second language presents its own challenges to students, learning about statistics and statistical procedures (especially when ill-prepared mathematically) is perhaps the most daunting challenge for many students. I can verify this as a teacher for many years of this subject at the doctoral level. In fact, I have had students who exhibited signs of apoplexy as I stood at the lectern! However, in my own case I was fortunate enough to have a teacher (Dr. Lou Pingel) who, although immersed in quantitative approaches, was an absolutely wonderful instructor because he not only followed the Three Rs, but he was so organized in his instruction and so willing to entertain questions (in fact, he sought to assess understanding questions out through his mannerisms and eye contact) that learning was pleasurable for me and my classmates. In fact, certainly not to boast, but after a sequence of several such classes I became rather skilled at this statistics thing.

PR: Well, since I am one side of our duality, I think that you know that I was scared and apprehensive about this whole statistics thing.

RP: Yes, I well remember! But look what's happened to us!

PR: And I think, here is where we get down to it. So, again about the gratitude, what advice can you give to others to address the issue of “accessibility” as you perceive it?

RP: Well, as a niece reminded me recently when deciding about moving and buying another house she said, “well you gotta go with your heart and your gut!” I think (and feel) that each one of us is on a journey to find better versions of the truth as our relationships and experiences accrete with us on this journey. Unfortunately (perhaps fortunately) as Soren Kierkegaard said, “life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward.” That is something to think about!

PR: So, what facets do you find important when thinking about quantitative versus qualitative inquiry and do you think anybody really cares what you think?

RP: Well, let me address the second part of your question first. Why indeed should anybody really care what I think about this topic? Do I really have anything worthwhile to say about this? Does anybody really know “what time it is?” (a song by the group *Chicago* in 1969 and has been inserted here as an attempt at a modicum of humor). These questions involve what I think folks talk about when they use the terms “reflexivity” and perhaps “positionality.” I like to think that I have some insights into this question but at times I feel like a fraud. Having never been formally trained (or educated) in qualitative inquiry but rather learning it

experientially (craft knowledge), I sometimes think that those who have labored in this vineyard for many years may balk at anything I put forward. I also profited greatly from reading what others have written including my favorites who not only have things to say but are able to say them clearly which for me include Egon Guba, Marilyn Lichtman, and Harry Wolcott. I also suffer from what I guess is the usual amount of pride and being full of oneself at times. So, I guess that in the end I just hope that in between and amidst these shortcomings that readers find something of value that they can work with as they fashion their own understandings and produce their own scholarship.

PR: Quite humble of you. Now, what about the first part of my question regarding the important facets or differences between qualitative and quantitative inquiry perhaps building on what you may steal excuse me... borrow from Egon Guba?

RP: A bit of a Freudian slip huh? Anyhow, just drawing on my experience and experiences with both quantitative and qualitative inquiry as well as “borrowing” from Egon Guba (1981), let’s just hit on a few things that I think are important. While I admire Egon Guba and his work, I also think that it was a mistake in his seminal 1981 article to legitimize qualitative inquiry by creating parallel terms and meanings based on criteria in quantitative inquiry such as internal validity, external validity, and reliability (see Guba, 1981, Table 1, p. 80). Don’t get me wrong, I think that Guba did a superb job thinking through what constitutes the similarities and dissimilarities between what he refers to as the “rationalistic” and “naturalistic” paradigms and their respective terminology and explaining how the two “paradigms” can co-exist. I emphasized the term “paradigms” because while Guba (1981) uses this same term when describing the differences between ways of learning as “paradigms for inquiry,” when we harken back to Kuhn’s (1970) assertion that when we discover a new paradigm, it is indeed more akin to a revolution than simply an extension of previous thinking.

PR: I sense that you are on the cusp of saying something important—are you?

RP: Honestly, I don’t know but I do feel like maybe I am on the “cusp” of something, although my mind is racing back and forth finding contradictions and roadblocks ahead.

PR: Give it a try!

RP: Well, I just wish that we had started out using qualitative inquiry afresh and a new paradigm in the Kuhnian sense rather than using quantitative inquiry as a yardstick for assessing qualitative quality (no pun intended). If you look at how we learn in our daily lives, we use all kinds of data and data collection instruments, including ourselves, to navigate through life and we flexibly and seamlessly switch from analyzing to synthesizing to reflecting to simply daydreaming and musing. Whether we are shopping, traveling, watching TV, listening to a lecture, walking in the park, conversing, studying, observing, or simply appreciating, we use our marvelous capacities and seamlessly code-switch as we transition among an almost unlimited panoply of sights, sounds, thoughts, and emotions to try and construct and create while simultaneously seeking

balance between change and growth with the preservation of our identities—not a small feat!

PR: And so...

RP: And so ... I just cannot help but think that while the tools of quantitative inquiry are fairly-well established that we have just begun developing and appreciating the potential for qualitative inquiry to help us more fully understand ourselves and the world around us without the artificial constraints of what we have come to unfortunately refer to as “science” that is often used to abrogate the perceptual, intuitive, and emotional aspects of growing and learning (see Lagemann, 2000). However, I also think that we have often set up straw men (much as our political parties do) to make the other guy (or in this case the other paradigm) into a bad guy. I often cite Pilcher and Cortazzi (2016) in which practitioners in the quantitative domain point out that they are not dismissive of qualitative inquiry and in fact, appreciate its role in discovery learning. I also wrote an article with a physicist colleague (Bernauer & Buxton, 2022) that further suggested to me that perhaps we have pigeon-holed each other into opposing camps which has prevented us from seeing the entire fabric of being, living, and learning using all the avenues mentioned earlier—our five senses as well as our hearts, insights, and even “gut feelings.” In fact, when we really look at how we identify and solve problems in real life, whether as a scientist or as a parent, we are like radar installations that register and react to both “objective” phenomena in the environment as well as our own “subjective” evaluation of these phenomena in relation to the totality of our experiences, values, remembrances, and our own identities that may be stable or “under construction” at various times.

PR: Well, I may need some time to digest all of that.

RP: Me too.

...time goes by...

PR: So, given all of that, how does this fit with the idea of “access denied” which, as you may recall, is the theme of this paper?

RP: Well, when I reflected during your and my mutual reflection time, I have begun to believe that perhaps the root cause of “denied access” stems from our cultural heritage of being enamored with science, “evidence-based” knowledge, and restricted and inaccurate conceptions of the scientific method while dismissing other ways of knowing. What comes to mind is when I had shoulder surgery and the very competent surgeon suggested that I take a glucosamine-chondroitin supplement daily and that he himself took this supplement. When I asked him if this really works, he said, “It can’t hurt.” In other words, here was a practicing medical doctor who admitted that he did not have all the answers based on clinical trials but rather based his willingness to try and connect the dots in an incomplete knowledge environment. Don’t we often do that in our lives? I love doctors who admit that they don’t have all the answers because it reflects their willingness to be open and to learn as we adventure forward in our personal and professional lives.

PR: Well said!

RP: Why thank you—you don't often hand out any compliments.

PR: However, based on all of this, do you have any suggestions for how to improve access to qualitative inquiry?

RP: Before I answer that question, on a more personal note (which is kind of funny since we are the same person), do you think that this Self 1, Self 2 approach is getting a bit tiresome to readers?

PR: Well, I'm not sure about readers but I'm getting a bit tired of this myself.

RP: Thanks for your honesty even if it hurts a bit. When I think back to all my training in quantitative methodology and the intensity with which I applied myself, I also remember how I asked myself something when graduation was near, something like, "OK, so I'm going to go teach at some university (Boston College) but as everybody knows, it is scholarship not teaching that really matters for tenure. What the heck am I going to write about using experimental and statistical methods?" You see, even back then, it is now apparent to me that while I truly appreciated the genius that spawned the development of experimental techniques, none of this made much sense in relation to what I was really interested in. Little did I know that those faculty members whom I felt sorry for because they were not working with numbers but rather whatever they worked with, were closer to my preferred way of discovering and learning. I now recognize that my training resulted in a mindset that was methodological rather than focused on learning about life using all the ways that we naturally learn. I was ingrained to learn about phenomena to generalize in a contextless environment rather than learning about the richness of the life lest we contaminate the data manufactured in labs that dominated our mindsets. I remember like yesterday visualizing myself being given a barren office at a university and trying hopelessly to think how I might pigeonhole what I was interested in into a scientific methodological approach. It was sad.

PR: Yikes, and so what do you offer to others now?

RP: Well, obviously I have grown beyond these painful memories, and in fact, I am thankful for the "equilibrium" that I am currently experiencing but also appreciate the need for "accommodation" (see Woolfolk, 2020, p. 48) when new experiences just don't seem to fit nicely or to assimilate into my existing cognitive structures because these experiences took me to where I am now, which is more of a balanced approach in which qualitative and quantitative inquiry are more integrated—at least in my mind. In fact, an incident happened just recently where a good Samaritan driver allowed another vehicle to go in front and make a left turn at a very busy intersection. Because of this kind action, I got the red light which caused me to feel irritated because I perceived that I would have a long time to wait for the light to turn green. However, I decided to "measure" (using the clock on my cell phone) how much time would elapse before I got a green light and much to my surprise it was less than three minutes which caused me to say to my wife something like, "Wow, that really was not too bad." I also

muttered something like, “where quant meets qual” which she just justifiably ignored! However, it was a lesson to me that reinforced my growing view that used with an open mind and heart, the two paradigms can complement each other in our pursuit of enlarging our understanding of our world and ourselves as Guba (1981) concluded.

PR: Thank you for sharing that with me!

RP: Thank you for listening but something else just popped into my head—would you like to hear it?

PR: Yes, but keep in mind the time and space constraints we are under!

RP: Will do. Anyhow, I recently submitted an article to a journal and a reviewer asked, “How will this add to the body of knowledge?” which, of course, is what we ask our doctoral students ad nauseam when they are writing their dissertations, typically using the phrase, “gaps in the literature” to help them. Now, on the one hand, I totally support this notion when we are examining things like astronomy, physics, economics, as well as perhaps the study and treatment of diseases. However, when we are dealing with human perceptions and emotions or examining phenomena on the fringes of our current understanding, then I’m not so sure. For example, how many plays, paintings, stories, movies, poems, sculptures, novels, and songs deal with the same theme but through creative nuances offer us new insights? Do these add to our body of knowledge? For example, the old theme “boy meets girl-boy loses girl-boy wins girl” has probably played out thousands of times throughout our history and yet we continue to enjoy and learn from contextual differences. Does this add to our “body of knowledge?” I would argue that it does indeed because each of us is so unique that we have been given the capability of seeing, hearing, creating, and transforming the same phenomena in ways that will forever continue to enlighten all of us.

PR: Wow, you have given me, and I hope others, some things to think about but could you end this conversation by taking us back to the theme of “qualitative inquiry-access denied?”

RP: You really must have listened over the years to your teachers about summing up and connecting the dots among and between the beginning, middle, and ending sections of an article or talk.

PR: Yes, you are well-aware that you yourself have subjected many students to this same discipline so please “sum up!”

RP: OK, let’s try and finish up this exploration. So, my major point is that not only are their external obstacles to accessing qualitative inquiry, but there are also internal elements that we ourselves must be aware of such as the probable enculturation that has resulted in us unconsciously elevating the “hard sciences” above what we do in the vineyards of qualitative inquiry. For example, in the field of educational research, Lagemann (2000) did a magnificent job of showing us how just like dominoes, psychology split from philosophy because science was put on a pedestal and the growing field of psychology did not want to be left

behind and so adopted the accoutrements of science. Unfortunately, because education relies heavily on concepts from psychology such as motivation and learning itself, it too tried to become more scientific, including in its teacher-education programs with their research components embedded in an incomplete understanding of the scientific method (Bernauer & Buxton, 2022). And so, I guess I want to conclude by encouraging everybody to revel in their own uniqueness and ways of knowing and always to be open to new things and to not allow your own beliefs about other ways of knowing to be denigrated especially in your own minds. This I think is a fundamental mechanism for denying access to qualitative inquiry. Do you think this is a sufficient summary?

PR: Well, I see now why we are so leery of reductionism where we need to strip away much of the contextual to identify “themes” because it almost strikes me as a “bumper sticker” mentality.

RP: While I concur with the sentiment, I like bumper stickers as well as Chinese fortune cookies (see Bernauer, 2023). However, I know what you mean. So, how about if I conclude by saying that there really is no conclusion because I hope everybody realizes that we are all participants in a never-ending story; even if we reach Oz, it truly is the journey that matters and what a wonderful journey it is!

PR: Any other final pearls of wisdom that you would like to share?

RP: Well, if you are looking for pearls of wisdom you will need to look elsewhere but I will say that to maintain our identity and balance we all develop ways of dealing with the world typically by adopting habits and “postures” (see Guba, 1981, p. 78) that enable us to hang together in one piece. Just like the first unspoken goal of any organization is to stay in business (no matter what else they may say), our unspoken goal is to remain as intact as our own individual selves. However, working to maintain this intactness has its own consequences, namely, to preserve the nature of all the filters noted earlier so that we present ourselves to ourselves and others with a narrative that does not upset our equilibrium which we sometimes refer to as harmony, peace, or contentment—our deepest desires. However, unless we are willing to be flexible enough to modify these filters as new relationships, experiences, and insights emerge, we will never get beyond or be able to refine what we have always accepted as truth.

PR: I feel tears welling up in my eyes so I think that you may have hit pay dirt. So, let’s leave it at that and say a fond farewell for now to our listeners and readers?

RP: You got it my friend and always remember that when you are stuck writing or solving a problem, take the advice my dad gave to me: “Do something even if it’s wrong.” It’s better than staying in a rut and not getting on with life’s adventures!

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