Review Essay: Qualitative Inquiry: Critical Perspectives on Methods and Ethics

John Mazzeo, DePaul University
Books Reviews

QUALITATIVE INQUIRY: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON METHODS AND ETHICS


JOHN MAZZEO
DePaul University, Department of Anthropology

These two volumes, edited by University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign faculty members, initiate a series that presents revised papers from conferences sponsored by the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI). Although still well worth reading several years after publication, the two volumes are most significant because they establish themes and approaches pursued in three subsequent volumes (Denzin and Giardina 2008, 2009, 2010).

The editors’ critical discussions of core topics and chapter summaries introduce each volume. One of their strengths is the broad range of disciplinary perspectives on a particular theme. Education, communication, health sciences, media studies, psychology, and sociology are well represented. Even though none of the contributors were anthropologists, the volumes’ explorations of methodological and ethical issues in qualitative research make them directly relevant to basic and applied anthropology. Likewise, although ICQI conference participants originally formed the volumes’ target audience, the editors selected contributions with input from diverse fields that will appeal to much broader audiences. Of interest to professionals because contributors reflect on problematic features of research methods and ethics, these volumes are also useful to Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) that evaluate research projects as well as for graduate courses where students learn the basics of social science inquiry.

The introduction to Qualitative Inquiry and the Conservative Challenge begins with a fiery condemnation of the National Research Council for its “war on truth”—a deliberate manipulation of science by favoring scientific biomedical research (SBR) in funding decisions to support the conservative agenda set forth by former President George W. Bush. SBR approaches to hypothesis testing, the editors emphasize, rely on randomization, quantification, and investigator objectivity. Drawing on the interpretive and critical paradigms of qualitative inquiry, “a reformist movement that began in the early 1970s in the academy (p. xvi),” the editors argue that SBR approaches, particularly those endorsed by the state, become problematic when used to generate policy-relevant evidence, because they fail to acknowledge the political and ethical dimensions of all scientific inquiry. Chapters in both volumes highlight how experiential, reflexive, and critical research methods enhance appreciation of the interactive, power-laden relationships between researchers and subjects. They challenge researchers to reconsider fundamental questions: “What is truth? What is evidence? What counts as evidence? How is evidence evaluated?” (2006:xv). Work by Paulo Freire (1995) informs this turn to critical inquiry as does an edited volume previously published by Denzin and Lincoln (2000).

Qualitative Inquiry and the Conservative Challenge has three parts, beginning with “Part One: The Politics of Evidence,” which evaluates conceptual problems posed by the SBR model and the intrusion of government agendas on research. Patti Lather’s “This IS Your Father’s Paradigm” (chapter 2) presents a discursive analysis of federal education policy research that reveals the pitfalls of evaluating schools and educator performance for purposes of educational reform. However, Lather’s analysis resembles those in many of the volume’s other chapters: it offers a strong critique without actually outlining an alternative research design or way forward. “Part Two: Decolonizing Methodologies” includes chapters that describe research with indigenous populations and using ethnographic methods. The authors seek to de-center the SBR
model, which they consider conceptually outmoded and ill-equipped for social science inquiry, because colonialisit and racist assumptions deeply mark basic SBR ideas about objectivity and knowledge production. For instance, in “Decolonizing Qualitative Research” (chapter 10), Elsa M. González y González and Yvonnna S. Lincoln show why researchers should make their findings cross-culturally understandable and relevant. “Part Three: Contesting Regulation” offers similar critiques, but, taking on race in addition to colonialism, argues that SBR approaches can neither accommodate nor accurately represent racially varied experiences. In “Affirming the Will and Way of the Ancestors” (chapter 12), Cynthia B. Dillard and Adrienne D. Dixon develop a Black feminist perspective on how qualitative research can be personally liberating by transforming consciousness of connections between past and present lives.

The introduction to Ethical Futures in Qualitative Research continues the attack on Bush administration policies, but extends its critique to popular culture (e.g., Mel Gibson’s film, Apocolypto) and the National Geographic Society Geographic Project. The volume also assesses ethical principles that guide research as well as the challenges that IRBs face as they draft human subjects protocols, raising concerns about any IRB’s capacity to ensure protection of human subjects. Drawing on a New Zealand Maori case study (Smith 1999), the editors argue that ethical research principles should emphasize a commitment to improving subjects’ well being rather than “doing no harm,” the position adopted by most IRBs since the landmark 1979 Belmont Report on human subjects research.

This volume, like its predecessor, is divided into three parts: “Ethical Challenges in Qualitative Research,” “Indigenous Moral Ethics,” and “Performing Ethics.” It also examines similar topics, but with noteworthy additions. One new topic is the role of IRBs, discussed in “The Pressing Need for Ethical Education” (chapter 3) by Thomas Schwandt, who illuminates many interesting aspects of the researcher–IRB relationship. His examples demonstrate the challenges of conducting ethically responsible scientific research and the communication problems for social scientists working with IRBs designed to accommodate high-risk biomedical clinical research. Part Two will be of particular interest to some anthropologists given its focus on ethical issues in work with indigenous populations. Advocating ways to protect indigenous knowledge, Marie Battiste’s “Research Ethics for Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage” (chapter 5), suggests several practical interpretations of ethical guidelines emerging from her work with Mi’kmaw Ethics Watch, which oversees research for the Mi’kmaw Nation in Nova Scotia.

Part Three explores how researchers incorporate ethics into the act of writing. “Notes Toward an Ethics of Memory in Autoethnographic Inquiry” (chapter 10), where Arthur P. Bochner reflects on the challenges of working through one’s own recollections, may be particularly useful to anthropologists for whom the researcher’s self and sensibilities form core elements of methodology. Of interest to all anthropologists is “Coda: Talking and Thinking about Qualitative Research” (chapter 12), a transcript of a panel discussion at the Second ICQI conference, where several contributors discussed wide-ranging research experiences.

These initial edited ICQI conference volumes make valuable contributions to interminable discussions among researchers about the production, uses (and abuses) of knowledge, and ways to improve research methodologies while protecting human subjects. For anthropologists, the issues under debate are not new. Long ago, Clifford and Marcus (1986), Marcus and Fischer (1999), and Rosaldo (1993) began to address problems of knowledge production, ethics, cross-cultural sensitivity, and colonial attitudes toward indigenous as well as non-indigenous peoples. For graduate students learning about qualitative research methods and for community researchers interested in practical guides, the volumes’ modes of presentation may decrease their usefulness. Despite extensive revisions and editing, the volumes still read less like thematically unified wholes than contributions to conference proceedings. The introductions do not adequately outline chapter themes, and most chapters neither begin with summaries or overviews nor offer systematic plans for improving qualitative research methods. Therefore, readers must wade through all of the chapters to identify and link core ideas about current practices and new directions.

Nevertheless, the volumes usefully illustrate how social scientists from varied disciplines and working in diverse contemporary research settings have approached fundamental problems in qualitative research. Properly framed for classroom discussion or training sessions, and buttressed by supplementary readings, the volumes advance awareness of connections among conceptual,
methodological, political, and ethical issues surrounding qualitative social science inquiry purporting to improve public policy.

REFERENCES


2009 Qualitative Inquiry and Social Justice. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.

2010 Qualitative Inquiry and Human Rights. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.


This richly documented book illustrates the layers and contours of the history, discourse, and consequences of high-stakes testing in the State of Texas, especially for students of color. Amanda Johnson does a masterful job excavating the processes through which students lose their humanity and are transformed into test scores. The backdrop for her analysis is the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF)-Olivas Multiple-Criteria Bill, which was proposed to the Texas Legislature to provide the opportunity for multiple assessments of students who fail high-stakes tests. As an actor and participant–observer in the effort to introduce and pass the bill, Johnson positions herself within the sphere of advocacy anthropology—an engaged discipline that seeks to utilize anthropological principles, theories, and insights to impact public policy.

The framing of Johnson’s research spans a stunning array of theoretical perspectives, drawing from Foucauldian conceptualizations of discourse and power an interrogation of the privileging of science and statistics, and from critical race theories that foreground the epistemic standpoints of students of color. Especially powerful is the evidence Johnson marshals to undergird her assertion that [reliance on] statistics “… as a discourse of truth, possesses its own political economy, but also as a technique of governmentality [it is] embedded in processes of racialization, commodification, truth production, and subjectivity formation” (p. 8). Through her exceptional use of student narratives regarding their own subjectivity formation in relation to high-stakes testing, she is able to construct a robust argument that students of color are most vulnerable to the forces of objectification.

It is in this last area that this book’s ethnographic research truly shines. The voices of students, parents, educators, community members, and especially women, are respectfully and fully presented in their complexity and resistance to high-stakes testing. Her own voice is a welcome personalization of the struggle and a contre-histoire to address high-stakes testing within the politicized and charged climate of the Texas Legislature.

An important aspect of Johnson’s argument is the profitability of testing and data-processing for private firms. This is directly rooted, she shows, in the “neoliberal imperative to privatize public functions; that is, redistributing funds directed toward public services to private companies” (p. 141). The objectifying measures of tests de-legitimize public schools as social welfare, “claiming to prove both the inefficiency of equitable district funding and the inevitability of ‘minority failure’” (p. 141). Thus, the real beneficiaries of the testing mandates are the testing companies that are able to perpetuate their own place within rhetorics of educational accountability.

Johnson’s chapter, “Contextualizing Education within the Racial Politics of Texas,” contains the most significant thread of her argument. She begins with a detailed account of racial politics in...