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## **Qualitative Research: A Defense of Traditions**

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I recently published two papers (Jacob, 1987, 1988) that dealt with qualitative research traditions. In one (Jacob, 1988) I argued that confusion has arisen in the educational literature because many scholars have treated the alternatives to traditional positivistic research as a single approach, often called "qualitative research," when, in fact, there are a variety of alternative approaches. I also asserted that the confusion could be clarified by using the concept of tradition. In the other article (Jacob, 1987), I described and compared several American qualitative traditions and discussed how they might contribute to educational research.

This article replies to the "British response" by Atkinson, Delamont, and Hammersley (1988) to my discussion of selected qualitative traditions (Jacob, 1987).<sup>1</sup> They faulted my review article on two main points. First, they argued that the concept of tradition is not useful for understanding social science research. Second, they complained that I should have included British work in my review article. In reply, I explain my use of the concept of tradition, explore various ways in which I find the concept helpful, and show why I did not need to include British work in my article.

### **What Does "Tradition" Mean?**

I adapted the notion of tradition from Kuhn's (1970) concept of paradigm, which he developed to understand the history of natural sciences. Kuhn used the term "paradigm" in two ways. The first, called "disciplinary matrix," refers to the "entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community" (p. 175). The second, called "exemplar," refers to the "concrete puzzle-solutions . . . employed as models or examples" (p. 175). In Kuhn's view, a disciplinary matrix forms around a particular exemplar.

While numerous scholars have sought to understand social sciences in terms of paradigms, these efforts have met with difficulty (Eckberg & Hill, 1980). Indeed, Kuhn himself did not see his notion of paradigm applying to social sciences (1970). Because the social sciences provide no exemplars comparable to those in the natural sciences, there are multiple ways of distinguishing paradigms in the sense of disciplinary matrices. For example, studies in sociology have identified from two to eight paradigms within the discipline (Eckberg & Hill, 1980).

Recognizing the problems with a strict application of the paradigm concept outside the natural sciences, I use the concept in the sense of disciplinary matrix as a heuristic framework for examining the social sciences. To signal this modification I used the term tradition rather than paradigm.

I use the term tradition in two ways. First, the concept of tradition focuses our attention on assumptions that researchers make about the nature of the human universe, theory, legitimate questions and problems, and appropriate methodol-

ogies. Second, a group of scholars who share these research-related assumptions are considered to form a tradition.

### **How Useful Is the Concept of Tradition?**

For students of social science literature, the knowledge that an author is operating within a particular tradition can provide insight into his or her assumptions, findings, and conclusions. For researchers, operating within a tradition can suggest foci of study and methods of research.

#### *Understanding Research Literature*

Within the social sciences, scholars recognize and write about intellectual communities such as “ecological psychologists,” “cognitive anthropologists,” or “neo-Marxists.” The concept of tradition can be used to examine the assumptions of these groups. Knowledge of shared assumptions aids in understanding and evaluating research studies. Some communities of researchers share assumptions at all levels (these I have termed traditions); others do not. Much social science work has been, and continues to be, accomplished within traditions.

Atkinson et al. concede that the concept of tradition is useful to make sense of the diversity of qualitative research (1988, p. 233). However, they assert that there is internal disagreement within traditions, that traditions are neither distinctive nor comprehensive, and that not all qualitative research fits within traditions. They conclude, based on these assertions, that “classifying researchers and their projects into ‘traditions’ is counterproductive” (p. 231). I disagree with this conclusion.

I have never suggested either that there must be total agreement among the scholars within a tradition or that traditions do not overlap. In fact, in my 1987 article, I explicitly acknowledged the diversity within holistic ethnography (p. 10) and the overlaps among traditions (pp. 32–37). Traditions are not, nor need they be, homogeneous entities with tightly defined boundaries. Homogeneity may be less than perfect, and boundaries may be less than precise.<sup>2</sup> But this does not disprove either the existence of traditions or the usefulness of understanding them.

The comment by Atkinson et al. that traditions are not necessarily comprehensive (1988, p. 233) is well taken. I may have overstated things in my abstract by saying that each tradition forms a coherent whole, comprising internally consistent assumptions. I agree that the assumptions of a tradition do not necessarily offer a complete epistemology or methodology.

Acknowledging the existence of traditions does not imply that all work fits within traditions. Atkinson et al. asserted that much sound work combines traditions without seeking to establish a new tradition. However, that some work combines traditions seems to support my point rather than deny it.

Atkinson et al. also argue that two major approaches, neo-Marxism and feminism, do not neatly fit the Kuhnian model. Not having carefully studied either neo-Marxism or feminism from the perspective of traditions, I am not prepared to argue whether they are “traditions” or not. According to Atkinson et al., these groups of scholars share philosophical assumptions but do not share methodological assumptions. If that is true, I would agree that neither meets all the criteria for a tradition. However, rather than nullifying the usefulness of the concept of tradition, these observations indicate that the general framework of traditions has been useful

in identifying differences among research approaches. It also raises some interesting questions.

What are the implications and consequences of this lack of methodological agreement among neo-Marxist or feminist researchers? Are there subgroups of neo-Marxists or feminists who *do* share methodological assumptions and thus have all the features of traditions? Are recent efforts in the United States to define “critical ethnography” (e.g., Brodkey, 1987) and “feminist ethnography” (Pitman & Einsenhart, 1988) traditions-in-the-making?

#### *Understanding Methodological Literature*

Recognizing differences in focus and in tradition can explicate diverse statements and positions in the methodological literature. In particular, an examination of existing traditions (Jacob, 1988) shows that qualitative methodology is not necessarily linked to interpretivistic philosophy. For example, human ethologists often collect qualitative observational data in naturalistic settings, but their philosophical assumptions are essentially positivistic. They share little with scholars of a more interpretivistic bent except their emphasis on naturally occurring behavior. Consequently, a human ethologist would provide very different methodological advice than a more interpretivistic researcher, even though both collect qualitative data.

#### *Conducting Research Within Existing Traditions*

Atkinson et al. (1988) were concerned that focusing on traditions might lead researchers to examine work only within a particular tradition, thus limiting their awareness of other relevant work. While this is a possible problem, it is not inherent in being aware of or operating within traditions. I agree that researchers should be aware of all work relevant to their focus of inquiry.

In my view, the use of qualitative traditions is more likely to be expansive than limiting to educational researchers. While any particular tradition presents only one way of looking at the world, exploring the results and implications of a world view can be very useful. An example from the natural sciences is instructive. It may be true that Newtonian physics had to be disregarded in order for Einstein to establish the theory of relativity. However, that does not alter the fact that the Newtonian paradigm provided an enormous stimulus that, for centuries, helped scientists to make new discoveries.

Qualitative traditions offer diverse, alternative ways of looking at education that differ from educators' traditionally psychologically oriented viewpoints. My review article (Jacob, 1987) provides several examples of relevant traditions. These and other alternative perspectives can expand our understanding of educational processes and outcomes.

Qualitative traditions not only offer new viewpoints, but also raise new questions, provide ways of answering these questions, and suggest new explanations. If the assumptions and foci of a tradition are compatible with those of a researcher, then the researcher has research models to follow and a group of scholars with whom to interact. Such research models can be especially useful for beginning researchers.

#### *Conducting Research Outside Existing Traditions*

Having just argued that qualitative traditions can play an important and expansive role in educational research, let me acknowledge that some researchers may

have questions that cannot be answered within existing traditions, and that some researchers may not share the assumptions of existing traditions. How are such researchers to go about answering their questions qualitatively? I think that both the framework of tradition and existing traditions can again be helpful.

The framework of tradition outlines the necessary components of all research, whether or not within a tradition. It suggests that researchers need to be aware of their assumptions about the human universe, theories, questions, research designs, methods for data collection and analysis, and the relationships among these components.

Focusing on theory is particularly important for qualitative research because researchers can interpret “openness” of qualitative research as indicating that no theory is needed. This is not the case. Openness does not mean that the researcher lacks assumptions. It means that, instead of starting with specific hypotheses to test, a researcher starts with what Whyte (1984) has called an orienting theory:

It is impossible to do research without theory because, at the outset of any project, theory indicates what phenomena are important to study . . . . [T]o plan a project [a researcher needs] *orienting theory*—orienting in the sense that it indicates what phenomena deserve particular attention and what other phenomena can be disregarded or be accorded less attention. (p. 275)

Researchers operating outside traditions (or intellectual communities more broadly) need to identify their orienting theories. For example, many educational researchers are interested in qualitative research as a way to understand people’s attitudes, values, norms, or beliefs. Anthropological traditions use orienting theories related to the concept of culture to examine ideational aspects of human life. While qualitative researchers are not required to use culture as an orienting theory, the tradition framework suggests they need some orienting theory to guide their work.

Analysis of existing qualitative traditions could identify the range of research designs and methods currently available. Such an outline of existing options would not set limits but would offer starting points. Research traditions are not dogmas; they have been developed by groups of researchers to meet particular needs.

A-traditional research designs and methods might be derived from single traditions. An intriguing example is work done at the U.S. General Accounting Office ([GAO], 1987). They have adapted the tradition of holistic ethnography for use without anthropological or sociological theory. They call the result “case study evaluation,” describing it as a “method for learning about a complex instance, based on a comprehensive understanding of that instance obtained by extensive description and analysis of that instance taken as a whole and in its context” (p.9).<sup>3</sup>

Other research methods might be derived by comparing a range of qualitative traditions inductively to identify patterns and their variations among the traditions. This comparison might provide a foundation for developing general methodological guidelines.

Suggesting that we try to develop a-traditional qualitative methodologies does not leave me entirely comfortable. As I indicated in my earlier articles (Jacob, 1987, 1988), I have found many previous attempts to distill qualitative research into a unitary phenomenon to be both narrowly prescriptive and problematic. If qualitative research is done outside traditions, researchers could benefit from understanding the rich variety of assumptions and related methods that currently exist.

Moreover, we need to explore the implications of removing methods and designs from their traditions. For example, the GAO case study approach (1987) seems to offer researchers a framework for the holistic study of educational phenomena. But without anthropological or sociological theory, what orienting theory will researchers use? Will the assumptions behind the methods be consistent with the new orienting theories? At another level, the nonprobability sampling used in participant observation is justified in anthropological studies by the assumption that “a common culture is reflected in practically every person, event, and artifact belonging to a common system” (Honigman, 1970/1973, p. 271). How can nonprobability sampling be justified in studies that do not focus on culture?

### Was British Research Needed in My Review?

Atkinson et al. (1988) complained that I did not include British research in my article. They argued that I should have reviewed British work because it is not a copy of American research and because American researchers can gain by understanding an educational system different from their own.

I agree that American researchers could benefit from increased understanding of British research and, through this research, from a better understanding of British education. As an anthropologist, I concur that it is important when studying one’s own society and culture to “make the familiar strange” and that awareness of other societies and cultures is helpful in achieving this needed distance. Similarly, British researchers could benefit from increased understanding of American research, as Delamont and Atkinson (1980) themselves pointed out in an earlier article in a British journal. I would further add that both American and British researchers studying their own education systems have much to gain through familiarity with educational systems that differ more radically from their own. However, I disagree with Atkinson et al. that I needed to include British research in my article.

As I stated in my review (1987, p. 2), my goal was *not* to conduct a comprehensive review of qualitative research on education, but to describe and compare some representative *American* traditions in order to make the point that there is diversity within qualitative research and to demonstrate ways in which some of the diverse qualitative traditions might contribute to educational research. I hoped that the article would help clarify the discussion about qualitative research and would provide a resource for educational researchers interested in qualitative research. A comprehensive treatment was not necessary to support my argument, nor was it possible, given the space limitations of the journal.

I selected the specific traditions for that article because they had been cited in the literature as sources of competing characteristics of qualitative research and because I thought that they could be useful in understanding education. I never said, nor do I believe, that these were the *only* qualitative traditions that could be useful. In fact, I stated twice (1987, pp. 2, 39) that there are other traditions that could be useful. While including British work would not have been inappropriate, I do not think that I needed to include British research traditions, or all American traditions for that matter, to make my main points.

Atkinson et al. interpret the fact that I did not include British traditions in my review as “a personal slight to non-American authors” (p. 232) and accuse me of “academic ethnocentrism” (p. 232). I find the pejorative nature of their complaints

surprising and inappropriate, especially given that their response to my article could be the target of the similar comments by scholars in other nations. Atkinson et al. discuss *only* British traditions in their review. While they acknowledge that important work is being done in Australia and New Zealand, they do not include that work in their review, nor do they acknowledge that important work is being done in non-English-speaking countries. Does their review of only British research indicate that they are guilty of “academic ethnocentrism?” Or does it mean that they necessarily and legitimately set some limits on the scope of their review?

### Conclusion

In sum, I find the notion of tradition, adapted from Kuhn’s concept of paradigm (1970), useful for understanding existing work and for guiding the conduct of research. I see it as broadening the range of options available to educational researchers, as helping to clarify the literature, and as a way to develop criteria for sound work.

In my 1987 article I said that future reviews needed to deal with traditions that I did not cover. Atkinson et al. (1988) have made a first step toward this through their discussion of British work. I urge other reviews, in more depth and dealing with all the components of traditions, from Britain as well as from other nations.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this paper I address issues related to traditional social science research. Qualitative research by teacher-researchers raises other issues that are beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The permeability of social science traditions is manifested in other ways. Individual scholars can and do move among traditions. Some may operate within different traditions at different times; some may draw upon multiple traditions within the context of a given study. Some may find existing traditions inadequate; these scholars may then combine perspectives of traditions or raise entirely new questions.

<sup>3</sup> I agree with Wolcott (1980) that it is useful to limit the use of the term “ethnography” to those studies that operate within a tradition such as holistic ethnography and to distinguish such ethnographic studies from those that borrow the design and methods without using the orienting theory.

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