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Journeying the Quagmire: Exploring the Discourses That Shape the Qualitative Research Process

Deborah O'Connor

In the struggles to have its legitimacy recognized, qualitative research has been framed as a singular entity understood in relation to quantitative research. This interpretation is now being challenged, resulting in the emergence of increasingly complex, frequently contradictory, and often unarticulated understandings of the goals and practices associated with qualitative research. This article chronicles the pragmatic and ethical struggles the author encountered as her own ideas, reflecting the developing status of qualitative research perspectives, gradually shifted during the process of conducting a doctoral study. The purpose is to open for discussion the implications associated with contradictory discourses around qualitative research.

Historically, in the struggle to have its legitimacy recognized, qualitative research has too frequently been framed as a singular entity understood in relation to quantitative research. There

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is an implicit assumption associated with this understanding that qualitative researchers are united in their vision of the qualitative research process and outcomes. Furthermore, this understanding conveys the impression of a field of inquiry that is static. This generic discussion about qualitative research ignores the reality that the expectations, process, and outcome of a qualitative project can vary immensely, depending on the worldview of the qualitative researcher. Similarly, often absent is the acknowledgment that qualitative research is conducted in a developing, complex field fraught with contradictions, ambiguities, and gaps.

The failure to articulate explicitly the worldview most influencing the research process, compounded by the evolving qualitative research context, can create confusion, self-doubt, and frustration for new qualitative social work researchers. The purpose of this article is to examine how this subtly changing terrain influences the research process. I begin by mapping a context for situating qualitative research. Specifically, I identify three competing discourses, or sets of beliefs, assumptions, and values, currently being used to guide the qualitative research process: the traditional, critical, and poststructural. Then, grounded by a retrospective analysis of my doctoral research process, I focus on three struggles that I encountered related to the developing understandings about qualitative research: First, how could I capture the complexities and contradictions contained in the research participants' experiences? Second, whose voice did my research really represent? Finally, how could I tell if my research was good research? This article discusses my struggles with these three issues in order to begin to explore the impact that emerging, sometimes contradictory, discourses can have on the research process while simultaneously making visible the complexities of the research process that are frequently hidden by the intact final account of a research project. I note that this article focuses explicitly on the research process *per se*, not on the research itself; readers who are interested in the actual research are referred to O'Connor (1999).

ESTABLISHING THE TERRAIN

Three particular discourses about the qualitative research process are emerging that have practical implications for conducting a study. The first discourse to emerge relies implicitly on what I, consistent with Neuman (2000), am loosely labeling as an interpretivist perspective. The set of ideas, values, and beliefs underlying this perspective challenges the more positivist assumptions associated with quantitative research. One way this is done is by shifting the focus from the notion of one truth, or reality, to recognize the importance of developing an understanding of an experience, phenomenon, or process that is contextual and grounded by the knowledge of those who have had the experience. Grounded theory would be an approach to research that incorporates this worldview. Described as a middle ground, this perspective rejects some aspects of empiricist thinking but holds that inquirers must avoid the subjectivity and error of naive inquiry through the judicious use of method (Schwandt, 1994). This could arguably be identified as the default positioning, grounding discussions about qualitative research in social work.

A second discourse, the critical paradigm, emerged to challenge and extend some of the ideas associated with an interpretivist perspective. In particular, feminist research brought to the forefront the need to explicitly address issues such as the relationship between the researcher and researchee, the relevance of the researcher's standpoint or position, and the importance of research for giving voice to women and other oppressed and marginalized groups (Cancian, 1992; Mason, 1997; Riger, 1992). Positioned within this perspective, inquiry is more than just studying others; research aims to empower and promote action against inequities. This perspective opens to question some of the beliefs and practices associated with more traditional understandings of qualitative research. For example, ideas about objectivity have been challenged (Fee, 1981; Harding, 1987). The relevance of the values, beliefs, and assumptions associated with a critical perspective, particularly a

feminist approach, to social work research has been clearly advocated (see, for example, Mason, 1997; Swigonski, 1993).

By the early 1990s, the research terrain was subtly shifting to include the ideas of poststructuralism. From this position, reality is recognized as a social construction, both produced through and reflected by language. This understanding openly challenges more traditional understandings of individuals as fixed, coherent, and rational entities by introducing the idea that persons use multiple and sometimes contradictory discourses, or story lines, to make sense of their personal experiences. It encourages researchers to engage in a form of reflexivity in which the analysis of practice involves multiple layers, multiple truths, and multiple voices (Cheek, 1999). The research shifts the focus from individual experience to begin to tease out the assumptions underlying particular ways of making sense and to examine why some ways of understanding appear to be more accepted and less marginalized than others. Whereas some feminist researchers embraced these ideas, ongoing debate continues within the feminist literature regarding the compatibility of feminist values and beliefs with poststructuralism.

This chronological development provides the contextual landscape through which I traveled with my doctoral research. I note that it is only in retrospect that this context achieves any clarity. I do not think I am alone; even in 1992, articulating what constituted feminist research remained on the agenda (see, for example, Cancian, 1992; Reinharz, 1992). Certainly, the simplistic linearity of the development that is being presented here is an illusion. Moreover, although there is clear agreement that the terrain is developing, understanding and positioning of the various discourses about qualitative research are still in the formative stages (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). There are a number of maps being used to describe and interpret the terrain; I have presented mine. I also want to clarify that it is not my intent to create distinct categories of research perspectives but, rather, to present a continuum of knowledge development and understanding about the research process. For example, feminist research varies in its affiliation with traditional interpretivist

ideas of research and with ideas associated with post-structuralism. Similarly, different approaches to research, such as hermeneutics and social constructionism, blur the lines between poststructuralism and interpretivism, and attempts to position approaches have not achieved consensus.

Recognizably then, any attempt to label the different perspectives is complicated. Moreover, the endeavor to situate approaches, such as grounded theory, phenomenology, feminist research, and hermeneutic inquiry, within these perspectives is fraught with discrepancies and conflict. Despite this, these perspectives do flavor the research process. Using my research journey as the reference point, in the next sections I begin to explicate the practical implications that competing and developing discourses had on my research process.

PLOTTING THE COURSE

When I began to plan my study in 1991, the assumptions and practical understandings that I held about qualitative research were predominantly grounded in the interpretivist tradition. Before this study, my research background was exclusively quantitative. My introduction to qualitative research was through Glaser and Strauss (1967), and I relied extensively, although not exclusively, on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Patton (1990) for direction in developing my proposal. I did not consciously make the decision to assume this perspective; rather, I see it now as the default position for conducting qualitative research.

The purpose of my study was to explore the subjective meaning associated with the use of formal support services by spouses who were living with memory-impaired partners. I note in retrospect that in my proposal I had referenced *meaning*, not *meanings*—indicative, I think, of the simplistic linear lens with which I unwittingly approached the research. I rationalized my decision to use qualitative research methods by highlighting inconsistencies in the quantitative literature on the use of services by family members, noting that previous research

had been researcher driven and narrowly focused on selected aspects of the experience of providing care. I also pointed out that qualitative methods were best suited for exploring subjective experience. Specifically, recognizing that the voices of family members who had assumed the caregiving function had been curiously overlooked in the massive body of literature about the caregiver, I wanted to give these individuals a chance to have their voices heard. I was particularly interested in hearing from the so-called "resistant" caregivers—the individuals who had refused services despite an objective appraisal of need.

At this point, feminist principles about research were just beginning to influence my approach. Feminist theory maintains an explicitly critical stance focused on the perspective of the outsider, the oppressed, the repressed—the silenced ones (Gorman, 1993). In this project, I explicitly recognized that women's and men's experiences might be different, so I planned to do a gendered analysis. Moreover, I designed the project with a focus on equalizing power relationships. This included scheduling interviews at a time and location of the participant's choice; implementing a relatively unstructured interview format to encourage participants to assume control over what was said; returning transcripts for editing and/or elaborating, sharing with each person my understanding of key issues emerging in each person's experience; and finally, being open about myself and responding to questions honestly and personally rather than preserving a more traditionally sanctioned facade of impersonality and distance. I viewed one's personal experience as a lived version of political reality. My goal was to make visible sites of oppression—I must confess, however, that what this would look like and how I was going to do it were not clear at this point!

Reflecting my positioning at the time, my research proposal included a number of strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of my data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, to promote plausible and believable results, the following strategies were planned: multiple interviews with each participant to move beyond superficial discussion of the issues and establish a

trusting relationship, sampling until the point of redundancy, repetitive "member checks" through a discussion of transcripts and emerging findings with participants, and implementing negative case analysis to develop an inclusive conceptualization. Similarly, to ensure dependability, I planned to maintain detailed process notes and work closely with my colleagues and supervisory committee. I recognized the need to provide details on the research context and to include the actual words of participants to facilitate transferability. Ethical review in hand, I began the project feeling vaguely confident that I had a clear idea about what I was doing and what I hoped to achieve.

SETTING FORTH

Somewhat naively, I set out to capture the words and voices of my participants. I successfully recruited 14 participants for my study and conducted up to three in-depth interviews with each. Each interview was loosely structured, and the participants were encouraged to tell their stories in their own words. During the interview, I repeatedly checked back to make sure that I understood what I was being told. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

This part of the journey proceeded relatively smoothly. As I had expected, I had difficulty locating potential participants, so this part of the process was time consuming and required that I rethink my ideas regarding who constituted a suitable participant. For example, I decided to interview one participant who did not meet the basic criteria of having refused services, yet, because in casual conversation she spoke to the themes that were emerging from my other interviews, I thought she could help me refine my insight regarding the issues. It was a thought-provoking interview and led me to search out another participant who, on the surface, did not meet the initial criteria for inclusion. Although this action made sense at the time, as I neared the end of the interviewing process and realized that two of the participants did not meet the basic criteria that I had initially laid out and that my sample was too small to generalize

anyway, I began to seriously question the value of my work. This crisis was successfully resolved after I shared my concerns with a member of my committee. She asked me to outline why I had interviewed each person. When I responded by outlining the rationale that had been used to select each participant, she reminded me that I *was* doing purposive sampling. I realized at that point that I had somehow fallen back into a more positivist understanding of the research process, and after regaining my footing, I consciously reminded myself not to judge my research by irrelevant standards. Except for this misstep, I managed to remain firmly ensconced in a paradigm that made sense for qualitative research.

Analysis began immediately after the first interview. I began by reading and rereading each transcript and highlighting essential phrases and ideas. I then developed these ideas through further interviewing. This included actively soliciting input from participants regarding what they thought about tentative understanding—how did my understanding fit with their experience? I incorporated their comments into my emerging analysis. Gradually, through this process of scrutinizing the transcripts to tease out key dimensions of the experience; considering these ideas across cases; and discussing my ideas with the participants, selected colleagues, and committee members, I began to isolate several themes that I felt were important for understanding the meaning of service use.

VEERING OFF THE PAVED PATH: PRESERVING CONTEXT

Something was wrong. According to the literature, I was—or should have been—ready to write. Painstakingly, I began to try to capture my understanding on paper. I wrote nearly 50 pages before I finally acknowledged my increasing dissatisfaction with the route that I was taking. Although I felt that the themes I had isolated were important, the understanding that I was proposing felt too simplistic. It did not reflect the contradictions and complexities that were apparent in each person's story. For example, how was it that the same husband could passionately

argue the need for increased respite, berate the government for failure to attend to the needs of caregivers, and simultaneously refuse services that were available? Similarly, how could I understand one wife's extensive use of formal supports in the care of her mother—supports she described as life saving—but her adamant refusal to use these same services in the care of her husband?

Although I had not yet named it, I was encountering what I retrospectively consider a collision between my developing ideological perspective and the assumptions grounding my analytic strategy. Drawing on the dominant literature for directions with analysis, I was using what Maxwell (1996) described as a categorizing strategy. This analytic strategy focuses on pulling apart the data and then rearranging them into categories, broader themes, or issues that can be analyzed in more detail. Categorizing strategies help to reduce massive amounts of material into a form that is more focused, more insightful, and conceptually clearer. However, this process decontextualizes statements and fractures participants' stories; accounts are removed from their narrative context, and meaning is lost.

At the onset of my project, this analytic strategy fit with my expectations of my final product. However, reflecting both my continuing learning process and my immersion into my study, my standards began to change. It became increasingly important to me that the understanding of service use be contextualized within the broader experience of living with a memory-impaired partner. In essence, my research question had changed. I was now exploring how the private experience of living with a memory-impaired partner interfaced with the use of formal support services. Making this link required context.

I had reached a point in my journey at which I was forced to reconsider my path: Either I could continue down the road that was well traveled, or I could veer off onto a track that looked intrinsically more appealing, but for which there were few well-developed maps. I rerouted.

Because I wanted to capture the complexity associated with the experience and display the dimensions of the individual's

life in a way that effectively captured the relation between the individual's story and societal arrangements (Reinharz, 1992, p. 174), I decided to develop in-depth case studies on several participants. I selected four participants whose personal stories about their experiences seemed the most divergent and illuminating. Using the interview transcripts and field notes that I had on each individual, I began to try to "write" his or her story. The first step in this process was to find new strategies for developing an in-depth contextualized understanding of each person's story. This required moving beyond the traditional literature on qualitative data analysis. My perception at the time was that I was moving into an abyss where creative strategies for analysis were often hinted at but rarely fully described or, at best, were in the early stages of development.

At some point in the process, I stumbled upon the ideas associated with discourse and narrative analysis and I embraced the ideas coming out of this literature with enthusiasm. This literature positions personal texts and stories as the means by which individuals develop systems of meaning and beliefs; people not only interpret, but actually organize their experiences through storying and performing these stories. These stories are organized according to culturally available but tacit reasoning procedures (Widdicombe, 1993); in other words, culture, used broadly here to reference societal values and beliefs, "speaks itself" through an individual's story (Riessman, 1993; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). From a political perspective, this analytic method can be used to comment on social processes that participate in the maintenance of structures of oppressions (Kvale, 1996; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). These ideas resonated with and shaped my emerging beliefs about the importance of the data I had generated through my personal interviews: they provided a concrete strategy for operationalizing my objective as a feminist researcher of linking the personal to the political.

With increasing excitement, I struggled to apply these ideas to understanding my participants' stories. This was more difficult than anticipated. Discourse analysis does not refer to a distinct analytic strategy but, rather, denotes a variety of approaches in which the focus is on the significance and structuring

effects of language and that employ an interpretive and reflexive style of analysis (Burman & Parker, 1993, p. 3). Similarly, there is no precise understanding associated with the term *narrative* (Riessman, 1993). What is consistent however, is that focusing on the narrative shifts the attention from the experience itself to the telling about the experience.

I integrated the ideas of a number of discourse analysts into a framework for systematically examining the structure of the text proposed by Rosenthal (1993). Whereas previously the analysis had focused only on content, this new analytic method attended to both the content of the participant's story and *how* the participant told that story. This new analysis included examining the sequence of how the story unfolded with the assumption that the way in which one tells one's story is not haphazard; rather, there is an underlying rationale that accounts for how the story progresses. It also required scrutinizing the use of language, the flow of speech, and the nonverbal intonations associated with the actual words. As I examined the unfolding of the story, I made notes outlining my hypotheses and suppositions about what was being said. I then dialogued with the data, looking to verify or dispute my interpretations.

After finishing this detailed reading, I began to write the case studies. My first step in the process was to reconstruct, to the degree possible, a factual overview of the participant's particular situation. The focus was on extracting the objective data to develop a picture of what had happened and what the current situation was. Using this as a reference point, the next step was to develop the person's story in a way that captured the essence of the experience for that particular person.

This process helped to convey the complexities and humanity of each person's experience. Moreover, it provided an effective means for addressing my goal of making visible sites of oppression because it allowed me to begin to contextualize the individual experience within a broader sociopolitical context. However, in resolving my first dilemma—how to preserve context and complexity—I had inadvertently created my next.

SLIPPING INTO THE SWAMP: WHOSE VOICE?

The value of case studies for fostering analytic theorizing is well documented (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Moreover, case studies are strongly endorsed in the feminist research literature because they capture the essence of the person as a whole (Reinharz, 1992; Swigonski, 1993). Furthermore, as a social worker, their use is congruent with my professional value base (Gilgun, 1994). I began the process of writing with enthusiasm and commitment, struggling to make each person "come alive" in my story.

However, as I wrote, I became increasingly aware of a sinking feeling. By the time I was thoroughly immersed in developing a case study that made explicit the gendered interpretation associated with the use of formal support services, I was forced to acknowledge that I had inadvertently slipped into a swamp. Whereas case studies might be an effective way of preserving complexity and context, the result was an objectification of the study participants. This had certainly not been my intention!

I struggled to find a resolution. Instead, I became increasingly aware of the complexity of the issue. Ideals associated with feminist research that I theoretically embraced with enthusiasm were exposed as unexpectedly complicated at a practical level. The quagmire deepened when I realized that I was drawing on principles and ideas from contradictory ideological positions to make sense of the research process.

Feminist research positions the participant as a knower—each is an expert on his or her own reality. Within feminist or critical research, there is an assumption that those who have experienced structural inequities and oppressions are in the best position to make visible this experience. Moreover, there is an understanding that the voices of marginalized groups have been systematically excluded by more traditional research methods, and a goal of critical research, as I understand it, is to bring into the forefront individuals and groups who might otherwise remain invisible.

Ideas associated with poststructuralism muddy this vision. Poststructuralist thoughts shift the focus from a notion of pre-existing reality and the independent subject to a focus on language (Kvale, 1996). The discourse analytic strategies that I was developing were consistent with this approach. Initially, I had been focusing narrowly on developing insight into personal stories, but as I became more excited by discourse analysis, I found my emphasis shifting. Increasingly, I concentrated on making the link between the day-to-day talk about personal experiences and the broader story lines, or discourses, that were providing the context for this talk. I am using discourses here to reference the systems of values, beliefs, and assumptions that are used to construct an experience (Gavey, 1997).

Initially, this stance was empowering. It gave shape to my earlier vague notion about making visible sites of oppression. As I tried to identify the discourses, or story lines, that were being used to construct personal stories, I focused especially on disrupting and displacing dominant discourses. These are the taken-for-granted sets of assumptions, beliefs, and practices that often reflect a privileged, oppressive understanding (Gavey, 1997). For example, I began to consciously examine how our society produces resistance to formal support services for spouses caring for memory-impaired partners through assumptions about "family care" and wedding vows that are "for better or worse, until death do us part."

The dilemmas inherent in my approach were not immediately apparent to me. It was only upon reflection that I fully grasped that this analytic approach requires transcending the personal stories of the participants. The focus of analysis shifts from the individual to the discourses being used to make sense of the world. The entire issue of whose voice my work really represented was opened to question. I was no longer writing about a person's experiences; I was writing about discourses. An underlying philosophy of feminist research is the necessity of giving priority to the personal experience, but in this case, personal experience was being used as a means to an end.

Gavey (1997) noted that the antihumanism and decentering of the individual is so inimical to many feminists that they reject

this approach outright. I was more confused: On one hand this process did decenter the individual; however, it also provided a useful, nonpejorative way of understanding contradictory messages and actions at the personal level. For example, it allowed the concept of resistance to services to be understood not as an individual issue, but as an understandable response to a formal support system based on the assumption that families *should* care for their elders. When this assumption underlies the provision of services, the use of services is positioned as a sign of personal deficiency because one is not doing what one is *supposed* to be doing. Simultaneously, this perspective offered hope for change because oppressive discourses can be challenged and new story lines constructed. For example, in my study, when spouses reframed the use of services as a right, based on the extraordinary care they were providing to society, the use of support services was no longer perceived as indicative of a personal deficiency.

However, another issue related to voice complicated the picture. Specifically, because I was looking beyond the words that were being spoken, there was obviously a great deal of interpretation going on. Although I might be including the words of the participants, I was the one who was developing the framework for contextualizing these words and experiences. It was my agenda that was providing the filter for "hearing" their stories. How could I claim to be representing the voices of the individuals I had interviewed? I was telling a story about the story that had been told to me and, in doing so, the story I was telling became my own story. As I developed the cases, there were moments when I knew that the participant I was writing about would feel vindicated that she had been heard. However, there were other moments when I was uncertain that the participant would recognize his or her story in my rendition of it. To respond to this concern about representation, I revised my writing, trying to make it quite clear that I was interpreting, not simply reporting. I paid special attention to highlighting places where a different reading had been, or could be, given to the story.

In the course of doing so, a third question arose in relation to voice. When my work was positioned within a poststructural discourse, politically taking a stance emerged as problematic. Poststructuralism has been accused of relativity. It challenges modernist tendencies to categorize the world into distinct and dichotomized categories. Instead, contradictions and inconsistencies are used to disrupt this sorting, and artificial categories begin to break down. This creates an "us" that includes "them," rather than an "us" versus "them." Even categories, such as male and female, are subject to deconstruction.

There is a problem here. Political action *depends* on creating a coalition—an "us" who are different from "them." As Gill (1995, p. 166) noted, "the notion that human positions are multiple and fragmented can lead to a denial of identity around which we can collectively mobilize." Wetherell (1995, p. 128) captured the contradiction between feminism and poststructuralism when she noted that "we have to live with the fact that nothing is simple, there is no inherent meaning, everything is ambiguous. But of course, feminist psychology (and research) must be about taking stands and fighting."

In this project, I had wanted to use gender as a lens for understanding the experience. The question became, How could I make differences visible without reinforcing gender as a distinct category? How could I examine men's and women's experience separately without essentializing them? The struggle then became to write about a participant's experience in a way that respected his or her presence but also moved beyond it, to politicize the issues without essentializing them, and to maintain the complexity while still communicating. My vision could no longer be easily divided into distinct categories; rather, the image of a continuum began to dominate.

I gradually began to realize that in contrast to where I had begun, I was becoming increasingly present in my work as I attempted to make explicit my interpretations, my positioning. With this realization came the recognition that I could neither write *the* story of another person nor could I write the *whole* story; I could, however, write part of *a* story.

LOOKING FOR DIRECTION: WAS IT WORTH THE TRIP?

This introduced the third dilemma. If I was only writing part of a story—a story that was explicitly shaped by the personal experiences and understandings that I brought to the research process—how could I be sure that this was “good” research?

When I reviewed the criteria established at the onset of the project for assessing the soundness of this project, I found neither comfort nor guidance. Many of the assumptions inherent in the earlier conceptualization were no longer relevant. For example, the plan to sample until the point of redundancy assumes that the issue can be exhaustively explored and that the researcher will reach a point where no new knowledge is forthcoming. Several years later, I still look at my data and discover new ways of understanding. Similarly, negative case analysis, a process of focusing on cases that do not fit the emerging understanding, became problematic. The objective of negative case analysis, using an interpretivist lens, is to develop a more inclusive theory that can account for all exceptions. In contrast, while examining negative or unusual cases may be useful for fleshing out ideas, poststructuralism as an intellectual movement explicitly rejects the ideas that the world can be understood in terms of “grand theories” or metanarratives: All lenses will necessarily allow some aspects to be seen while simultaneously hiding others. There was no way I could write a completely inclusive theory!

I was not alone in my recognition that existing criteria were inadequate. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) earlier conceptualization of trustworthiness was being critiqued by Lincoln herself (Lincoln, 1995). An emerging focus in the qualitative research literature attempts to grapple with this “inescapable dilemma” (Garratt & Hodkinson, 1998; see also Kvale, 1995; Lather, 1993; Lincoln, 1995).

It was at this point that the ideas for this particular article really began. I needed to make sense of the differences between where I had begun and where I had finished. Had I simply become more knowledgeable through the process, or had the ground rules really changed? As I reflected on the process, I

TABLE 1: Discourses About Qualitative Research

	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Feminist-Critical</i>	<i>Poststructural</i>
Goal	Develop insight, ground theory	Empower, expose oppression	Challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, identify discourses
Whose voice?	The data speak for themselves, the goal is to know the experience	Giving voice to marginalized groups, situated knowledge	Multiple voices, multiple perspectives
Focus of analysis	The participant's experience or understanding	Personal experience as reflective of political inequities	Text, discourses, contradictions
Reciprocity	The participant is positioned as the expert	Equalize relationship	Engaged and self-reflective
Whose story?	Tells the story of . . .	Collaborative	Multiple stories, multilevel stories
Outcome	Impartial, nonjudgmental	Makes structural inequities visible, reinforces categories and fosters dualisms	Inconsistent and incomplete

was struck most forcefully with the recognition that some of the discomforts with which I struggled could be attributed directly to changing discourses about research. This is not to suggest that I was unaware that my ideas about qualitative research were changing. I was. However, up until this point, each dilemma had been examined in isolation from its context.

To develop a context for understanding my dilemmas, I focused on developing a more clear articulation of the different stances associated with particular discursive qualitative research positions. Table 1 presents an emerging attempt at clarifying these positions

It is recognized that this table is overly simplistic; creating categories where instead there should be continuums, assuming distinct entities that, in fact, do not exist. Nevertheless, for me, it served as a valuable tool for more explicitly positioning my project. I realized that when I had begun my project, I was

relying predominantly on the interpretivist story line to frame my understanding of the research process. Feminist research ideas were beginning to infiltrate my sense making and were offering a welcome, but sometimes contradictory, vision of the research process. As I continued learning about the research process within a research field that has continued to develop, the feminist story line gradually became more dominant, and a third story line, that associated with poststructuralism, gradually began to exert power. At this point, it is the assumptions, beliefs, and values associated with the two latter discourses that compete to position my understanding of the research process.

By positioning my work, I am in a better position to recognize when inappropriate standards or logic are being used to construct my process. I am also able to see the contradictions in the story lines that I am currently using to make sense of my research process.

EPILOGUE

I have presented this journey as though I was always clear what the issues were and where I was going. I was not. Initially, each problem was treated as a symptom of personal inadequacy, a sign that I simply had not "gotten it" yet. It is only in retrospect that I can clearly recognize that at least some of the issues I was encountering related to the state of the field, not personal limitations. Recognizing and articulating the differences in qualitative research discourses allowed me to begin to understand the contradictions and inconsistencies in both the literature and in my research process.

Historically, the debate about methodologies has often pitted qualitative researchers against quantitative researchers, or conversely, attempted to show the compatibility of the two approaches. In this article, I have tried to illustrate that this understanding is far too simplistic. It positions qualitative research as a distinct, congruent entity. Recognizing that qualitative research can be grounded in diverse, sometimes

compatible, but sometimes contradictory, ideologies requires that the debate move to a more sophisticated level. It means that qualitative researchers must begin to clarify their own positioning to be able to discuss and support methodological decisions. These ideas are not simply theoretical musings, they have pragmatic and ethical relevance.

The challenge, however, will be to recognize differences while avoiding the enticement to reify perspectives. Qualitative research is a fluid, changing process, not a fixed, nonemergent point. It is being conducted by people who are relying upon multiple, sometimes contradictory, and constantly developing discourses to make sense of the process. The need to recognize the diversity and contradictions among different qualitative researchers' perspectives requires attention. However, rather than advocate a purist approach, I suggest that we consciously and explicitly acknowledge the research process as a transitional process that reflects the development of the researcher and the field of qualitative research.

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