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## **The elephant in the living room: or extending the conversation about the politics of evidence**

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**ABSTRACT** The controversies surrounding the evidence-based research movement are reviewed from a critical pedagogy framework. Standards for assessing quality are forms of interpretive practice that enact a politics of evidence and truth. Moral and ethical criteria for judging qualitative research are reviewed.

**KEYWORDS:** *ethics, evidence, politics, standards, policy, praxis*

There is a current dispute between qualitative and quantitative research. It is international, acrimonious, and there are elements of state-sponsored support 'in the West' for a return to a kind of neopositivist quantitative inquiry. (Stronach, 2006: 758)

To serve evidence-based policymaking we probably need to invent a ... myth for qualitative work, that is we too have clear-cut guidelines and criteria, maybe not randomized control trials, but we have our criteria. (Hammersley, 2005a: 4)

Qualitative researchers are caught in the middle of a global conversation concerning the evidence-based research movement, and emerging standards and guidelines for conducting and evaluating qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2006). This conversation turns on issues surrounding the politics and ethics of evidence, and the value of qualitative work in addressing matters of equity and social justice (Lather, 2006: 789). In some senses this is like old wine in old bottles, 1980s battles in a new century.

Like an elephant in the living room, the evidence-based model is an intruder whose presence can no longer be ignored. Within the global audit culture<sup>1</sup> proposals concerning the use of Cochrane and Campbell criteria,<sup>2</sup> experimental methodologies, randomized control trials, quantitative metrics, citation analyses, shared data bases, journal impact factors, rigid notions of accountability, data transparency, warrantability, rigorous peer-review evaluation scales, and fixed formats for scientific articles now compete, fighting to gain ascendancy in the evidence-quality-standards discourse (Feuer et al., 2002; Lather, 2004a: 21; NRC, 2002: 47; Thomas, 2004).

The interpretive community must mount an articulate critique of these external threats to our 'collective research endeavor' (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006: 751; Freeman et al., 2007). We must create our own standards of quality, our own criteria (see Lather, 2006; St. Pierre and Rouleston, 2006).

I want to read the controversies surrounding this discourse within a critical pedagogical framework, showing their contradictions, their overlaps, the gaps that stand between them (Denzin, 2003). Standards for assessing quality research are pedagogies of practice, moral, ethical and political institutional apparatuses that regulate and produce a particular form of science, a form that may be no longer workable in a trans-disciplinary, global and postcolonial world. Indeed, within the evidence-based community there is the understanding that qualitative research does not count as research unless it is embedded in a randomized control trial (RCT)! Further, within this community, there are no agreed upon procedures, methods, or criteria for extracting information from qualitative studies. These interpretations must be resisted.

In reviewing these multiple discourses, I hope to chart a path of resistance. Because the qualitative research community is not a single entity, guidelines and criteria of quality need to be fitted to specific paradigmatic, and genre-driven concerns, e.g. grounded theory studies versus performance ethnographies. I favor flexible guidelines that are not driven by quantitative criteria. I seek a performative model of qualitative inquiry, a model that enacts a performance ethic based on feminist, communitarian assumptions.

I align these assumptions with the call by First and Fourth World scholars for an indigenous research ethic (Bishop, 1998; Rains et al., 2000; Smith, 1999). This call opens the space for a discussion of ethics, science, causality, trust, and a reiteration of moral and ethical criteria for judging qualitative research (Denzin, 2003, 2007; Denzin et al., 2006). I will conclude with a set of recommendations concerning review panels, scholarly associations, journals, and criteria for evaluating qualitative research.

### *The elephant in the living room*

I agree with Atkinson and Delamont (2006) who state that, 'We are appalled by the absurd proposal that interpretive research should be made to conform to inappropriate definitions of scientific research. ... Equally disturbing is the argument that qualitative research should not be funded if it fails to conform to these criteria' (p. 751; see also Erickson and Gutierrez, 2002: 221). Hammersley (2005a: 3), in turn, observes that 'Qualitative research tends to suffer by comparison with quantitative work because there is a myth that quantitative researchers have clear-cut guidelines which are available for use by policymakers (Was it a randomized controlled trial? Was there a control group?).'

Morse (2006a) extends the argument, 'Indeed, qualitative inquiry falls off the positivist grid. Why it barely earns a Grade of C- on the Cochrane scale! It gets

worse! It receives the “does not meet evidence standard” on the “What Works Clearinghouse” (WWC) Scale’ (Cheek, 2005, 2006; Morse, 2006a: 396).

Feuer et al. (2002) offer the counter-argument:

Although we strongly oppose blunt federal mandates that reduce scientific inquiry to one method ... we also believe that the field should use this tool in studies in education more often than is current practice ... Now is the time for the field to move beyond particularized views and focus on building a shared core of norms and practices that emphasize scientific principles. (p. 8)

A report by the National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research Standards states that, ‘We need criteria for comparing research methods and research evidence, we need terms like credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), confirmability (objectivity)’ (National Center for Dissemination of Disability Research, 2007).

A sceptic must ask, ‘Whose science? Whose scientific principles?’

#### TWO OTHER ELEPHANTS

The elephant wears two other garments, the cloak of meta-analyses, and the disguises of mix-methods research. The meta-analysis disguise invites the production of systematic reviews that incorporate qualitative research into meta-analyses (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). The mixed-method disguise revisits the concept of triangulation asking how qualitative and quantitative methods can be made to work together (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006).

There are problems with both disguises. Meta-analyses of published articles hardly counts as qualitative research in any sense of the word. The return to mix-methods inquiry fails to address the incommensurability issue – the fact the two paradigms are in contradiction (Smith and Hodkinson, 2005: 922–4). Any effort to circumvent this collision, through complimentary strengths, single-paradigm, dialectical, or multiple paradigm, mixed-methods approaches seems doomed to failure (see Teddlie and Tashakkoroi, 2003: 19–24).<sup>3</sup>

#### WHOSE CRITERIA, WHOSE STANDARDS?

Extending Smith and Deemer (2000), within the qualitative inquiry community there are three basic positions on the issue of evaluative criteria: foundational, quasi-foundational and non-foundational (see also Creswell, 2007: 203–20; Guba and Lincoln, 1989, 2005; Lincon and Guba, 1985; Spencer et al., 2003: 39). Foundationalists, including those who apply the Cochrane and Campbell Collaborations, are, in this space, contending that *research is research*, quantitative of qualitative. All research should conform to a set of shared criteria (e.g. internal, external validity, credibility, transferability, confirmability, transparency, warrantability (see Dixon-Woods et al., 2004, 2006; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003: 13).

Quasi-foundationalists contend that a set of criteria, or guiding framework unique to qualitative research need to be developed. These criteria may include

terms like reflexivity, theoretical grounding, iconic, paralogic, rhizomatic and voluptuous validity (Eisner, 1991; Lather, 1993a; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In contrast, non-foundationalists stress the importance of understanding, versus prediction (Denzin, 1997; Wolcott, 1999). They conceptualize inquiry within a moral frame, implementing an ethic rooted in the concepts of care, love, and kindness (also Christians, 2005).

#### POLICY AND PRAXIS

Evaluative criteria, as pedagogical practices, are shaped by what is regarded as the proper relationship between qualitative inquiry and social policy. Within the critical qualitative inquiry community at least four pedagogical stances, or identities can be distinguished. Each has its own history (Hammersley, 2005a): (1) discipline-based qualitative research focused on accumulating fundamental knowledge about social processes and institutions; (2) qualitative policy research aimed at having an impact on current programs and practices; (3) critical qualitative approaches which disrupt and destabilize current public policy or social discourse; (4) public intellectuals, public social scientists, and cultural critics who use qualitative inquiry and interpretive work to address current issues and crises in the public arena (Hammersley, 2005a: 3).

Hammersley (2005a: 5) cautions that 'We should not allow the close encounters promised by the notion of evidence-based policymaking, or even 'public social science,' to seduce us into illusions about ourselves and our work.'

Torrance (2006: 127) is quite assertive, 'This new orthodoxy seems perversely and willfully ignorant of many decades of debate over whether, and if so in what ways we can conduct enquiry and build knowledge in the social sciences, pausing only to castigate educational research for not being more like ... medical research.'

#### THE POLITICS OF EVIDENCE

The term politics (and ethics) of evidence is, as Morse (2006a) observes, an oxymoron, and this in more than one way. Evidence 'is something that is concrete and indisputable, whereas politics refers to "activities concerned with the ... exercise of authority [and power]"' (p. 395). Evidence in a countable or measurable sense is not something that all qualitative researchers attend to. Few critical ethnographers (Madison, 2005) think in a language of evidence, they think instead about experience, emotions, events, processes, performances, narratives, poetics, the politics of possibility.

And evidence is never morally or ethically neutral. But, paraphrasing Morse, who quotes Lerner (2004: 20), the politics and political economy of evidence is not a question of evidence or no evidence. It is rather a question of who has the power to control the definition of evidence, who defines the kinds of materials that count as evidence, who determines what methods best produce the best forms of evidence, whose criteria and standards are used to evaluate quality evidence? On this, Morse is quite clear (2006b: 415–16), 'Our evidence is considered soft ... it is considered not valid, not replicable, not acceptable! We have

failed to communicate the nature of qualitative evidence to the larger scientific community ... we have failed to truly understand it ourselves.' The politics of evidence cannot be separated from the ethics of evidence.

#### STATE AND DISCIPLINE SPONSORED EPISTEMOLOGIES

This ethical, epistemological, and political discourse is historically and politically situated. It plays out differently in each national context (see Atkinson and Delamont, 2006; Cheek, 2006; Gilgun, 2006; Lather, 2004a, 2004b; Morse, 2006a, 2006b; Preissle, 2006). In the USA, the UK, Continental Europe, New Zealand, and Australia, the conversation criss-crosses audit cultures, indigenous cultures, disciplines, paradigms and epistemologies, as well as decolonizing initiatives. Depending on the nation-state, the discourse goes by various acronyms. In the USA it is called SBR (Scientifically Based Research), or SIE (Scientific Inquiry in Education). In the UK the model goes by letters RAE (the British Research Assessment Exercise), and in Australia, RQF or the Research Quality Framework. All of these models are based, more or less, on the assumption that since medical research is successful, and randomized experimental designs are used and appreciated in medical science, this should be the blueprint for all good research (but see Timmermans and Berg, 2003).

There is not a single discourse. In the postpositivist, foundational and quasi-foundational American communities, there are multiple institutions (and conversations) competing for attention, including: (1) the Institute of Education Science (IES) within the US Department of Education; (2) The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), funded by IES; (3) the Cochrane-Campbell Collaboration (CCC) which contracts with WWC; (4) the National Research Council-SBR framework (2002, 2006) which implements version of CCC and WWC; (5) the recently IES funded (\$850,000) Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness (SREE); (6) the 2006 standards for reporting adopted by the American Education Research Association (AERA) which explicitly addresses standards for qualitative research, some of which are contained in documents prepared by members of the Cochrane Qualitative Methods Group (Briggs, 2006).<sup>4</sup>

#### *National Research Council*

The federally funded National Research Council (NRC) scientifically based research (SBR), or evidence-based movement argues that educational, health care and other social problems can be better addressed if we borrow from medical science, and up-grade our methods and create new gold standards for evaluating evidence (National Research Council, 2002, 2005).

For this group quality research is: scientific, empirical, linked to theory, uses methods for direct investigation, and produces coherent chains of causal reasoning based on experimental or quasi-experimental findings, offering generalizations that can be replicated, and used to test, and refine theory. If research

has these features it has high quality, and it is scientific (National Research Council, 2005: 20).

In the USA such research must also conform to the Office of Human Subject Research definition of scientific inquiry; namely scientific research is

any activity designed to test an hypothesis, permit conclusions to be drawn, and thereby to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge expressed in theories, principles, and statements of relationships. Research is described in a formal protocol that sets forth an objective and a set of procedures designed to reach that objective. (Title 45, Part 46, US Code of Federal Regulations; AAUP, 2001: 55; also, AAUP, 2006, 2002, 1981)

Hand in glove, ethics and models of science now flow into one another. IRB panels can simultaneously rule on research that is ethically sound, and of high quality. If these assumptions are allowed, we have lost the argument even before it starts.

Cannella and Lincoln are clear on this point (2004: 165, paraphrase):

The NRC report is a US government-requested project designed to clearly define the nature of research that is to be labeled as representing quality ... Accurately referred to as methodological fundamentalism ... contemporary conservative research discourses ... have ignored critical theory, race/ethnic studies, and feminist theories and silenced the voices and life conditions of the traditionally marginalized. (See also Feuer, 2006; Freeman et al., 2007; Hammersley, 2005a; St. Pierre, 2006; St. Pierre and Roulston, 2006)

#### IMPLEMENTING THE NRC MODEL

Thirteen recommendations for implementing the NRC model are directed to federal funding agencies, professional associations and journals, and schools of education. These recommendations state that:

Research Agencies should:

- \*\* Define and enforce better quality criteria for peer reviewers;
- \*\* Ensure peer reviewer expertise and diversity;
- \*\* Create infrastructures for data sharing.

Publishers and Professional Associations should:

- \*\* Develop explicit standards for data sharing;
- \*\* Require authors to make data available to other researchers;
- \*\* Create infrastructures for data sharing;
- \*\* Develop standards for structured abstracts;
- \*\* Develop manuscript review system that supports professional development.

Schools of Education and Universities should:

- \*\* Enable research competencies;

\*\* Ensure students develop deep methodological knowledge;

\*\* Provide students with meaningful research experiences.

There are several problems with these NRC formulations and recommendations. I start with Maxwell. He unravels and criticizes the centrally linked assumptions in the model (Maxwell, 2004a, 2004b). His six points constitute powerful criticisms of SBR. He argues that the model assumes a narrow, regularity view of causation, privileges a variable-oriented, as opposed to a process-oriented view of research; denies the possibility of observing causality in a single case; neglects the importance of context, meaning and process as essential components of causal and interpretive analysis; erroneously asserts that qualitative and quantitative research share the same logic of inference; presents a hierarchical ordering of methods for investigating causality, giving priority to experimental and other quantitative methods (2004b: 3).

Feuer et al. (2002: 8) attempt to finesse this criticism, creating a special place for qualitative research, suggesting it can be used to capture the complexities involved in teaching, learning and schooling; that is

when a problem is poorly understood, and plausible hypotheses are scant – qualitative methods such as ethnographies ... are necessary to describe complex phenomena, generate theoretical models and reframe questions ... We want to be explicit ... we do not view our strong support for randomized field trials and our equally strong argument for close attention to context ... as incompatible. Quite the contrary: When properly applied, quantitative and qualitative research tools can both be employed rigorously and together. (Feuer et al., 2002: 8)

Finessing aside, the NRC is clear on this point, 'a randomized experiment is the best method for estimating [causal] effects' (Feuer et al., 2002: 8).

Flashback to 1926. Déjà vu all over again. Lundberg (1926), sociology archpositivist, is arguing against the use of the case method:

The case method is not in itself a scientific method at all, but merely the first step in the scientific method ... the statistical method is the best, if not the only scientific method ... the only possible question ... is whether classification of, and generalizations from the data should be carried out by random, qualitative, and subjective method ... or through the systematic, quantitative and objective procedures of the statistical method. (Lundberg, 1926: 61)

Fast forward to 1966, to Howard S. Becker (1966):

The life history method has not been much used by contemporary sociologists, a neglect which reflects a shift in

the methodological stance of the researcher. Rigorous, quantitative, and (frequently) experimental designs have become the accepted modes of investigation. This situation is unfortunate because the life history, when properly conceived and employed can become one of the sociologist's most powerful observational and analytic tools. (Becker, 1966: xviii)



The presumption that only quantitative data can be used to identify causal relationships is problematic. Maxwell (2004a) shows how the SBR model neglects meaning, context and process. He demonstrates that causality can be identified (after Hume), in the single case; that is multi-case, variable-based causal arguments are just one form of causal interpretation. Other causal, or quasi-causal models of course are based on multi-variant, process, contextual, and interactionist-based assumptions. Further, causality as a type of narrative is only one form of interpretation. Autoethnographic, performative, arts-based, ethnodramatic, poetic, action-based and other forms of narrative representation are equally powerful methods and strategies of analysis and interpretation.

In addition to Maxwell's six basic criticisms, I add the following. First, amazingly, there is little attention given to the process by which evidence is turned into data. This is not a simple process, and not accomplished by waving a wand over a body of observations. Second, nor is there a detailed discussion of how data are to be used to produce generalizations, test and refine theory, and permit causal reasoning. It is clear, though, that data becomes a commodity that does several things. That is, third, evidence as data carries the weight of the scientific process. This process works through a self-fulfilling, self-validating process. You know you have quality data that are scientific when you have tested and refined your theory. How you have addressed problems in the real world remains a mystery.

Fourth, the focus on data sharing is critical, and of central concern. It is assumed that quality data can be easily shared. But complex interpretive processes shape how evidence is turned into data, and how data, in turn, are coded, categorized, labeled, and assembled into data banks (Charmaz, 2005). Data are not silent. Data are commodities, produced by researchers, perhaps owned by the government, or by funding agencies. What would it mean to share my data with you? Why would I want to do this? If I own my data I want to have ownership over how it is used, including what is published from it. The injunction to engage in data sharing requires amplification. Data sharing involves complex moral considerations that go beyond sending a body of coded data to another colleague.

Fifth, money, and concerns for auditing from the audit culture seem to drive the process. This is evidenced in the emphasis placed on funding and quality peer reviews. If quality data can be produced and then shared, then granting agencies get more science for less money. However, in order for greater data sharing to occur, more quality projects need to be funded. For this to happen granting agencies need a better peer review system with better trained reviewers, who are using more clearly defined rating scale levels. Reviewers will be helped if researchers write proposals that use rigorous methodologies and the very best research designs. Such projects will surely have high standards of evidence. Thus does the self-fulfilling process reproduce itself. We know we are getting quality science of the highest order because we are using methods of the highest order. Reviewers can easily identify such work. The blind peer review, based on presumptions of objectivity is the key to this system.<sup>5</sup>

The peer-review system is not immune to political influence. Kaplan (2004) has demonstrated that the Bush Administration has systematically stacked federal advisory and peer-review committees with researchers whose views match the President's on issues ranging from stem-cell research to ergonomics, faith-based science, AIDS, sex education, family values, global warming, and environmental issues in public parks (also Monastersky, 2002).

## *SREE*

The Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness (SREE) extend the federally-sponsored NRC agenda. It appears to oppose recent efforts within the American Educational Research Association (AERA) to soften NRC guidelines (see below). The code words for SREE, which plans its own journal (*Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* – JREE), handbook (*Handbook of Research on Educational Effectiveness*) and electronic journal (*Research Notes on Educational Effectiveness*), are: rigorous research design, and randomized control experiment: The mission of SREE is

to advance and disseminate research on the causal effects of education interventions, practices, programs, and policies. As support for researchers who are focused on questions related to educational effectiveness, the Society aims to: 1) increase the capacity to design and conduct investigations that have a strong base for causal inference, 2) bring together people investigating cause-and-effect relations in education, and 3) promote the understanding and use of scientific evidence to improve education decisions and outcomes. (See [www.sree-net.org](http://www.sree-net.org); also Viadero, 2006)<sup>6</sup>

There is no place in SREE here for qualitative research. This is hardcore SBR: evidence-based inquiry. Scientific research becomes a commodity to be sold in a new journal, a commodity that serves and embodies the interests of educational science as narrowly defined.

## *The Cochrane, Campbell, What Works Clearinghouse collaborations*

The Cochrane, Campbell and What Works Clearinghouse Collaborations are inserting themselves into the qualitative research conversation. All three represent state-sponsored projects. All three are dedicated to producing so-called scientific peer reviews of quality (evidence-based) research that can be used by policymakers. The Cochrane Qualitative Methods Group focuses on methodological matters arising from the inclusion of findings from qualitative studies into systematic reviews of evidence-based inquiries. The Campbell Methods Group focuses on methodological issues associated with process evaluations, which use mixed methods, while including evidence gathered via qualitative methods. It is understood that qualitative research can help in understanding

how an intervention is experienced, while providing insight into factors which might hinder successful implementation.

Randomized controlled trials are central to all three Collaborations. Hence qualitative evidence is of primary interest only when it is included as a data gathering technique in an experimental, or quasi-experimental study (Briggs, 2006). There is some debate on this point, that is whether 'only qualitative research embedded within relevant RCTs should be included' (Briggs, 2006). The Campbell Collaboration only includes qualitative materials if they are part of controlled observations (Davies, 2004: 30). However, there is no consensus on how to include qualitative evidence in such work; namely how to identify, record, appraise and extract data from qualitative studies.

#### APPRAISAL TOOLS

Enter CASP – the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (Briggs, 2006), which was developed in conjunction with the Cochrane Qualitative Research Methods Group (CQRMG). The Cochrane Group (Briggs, 2006) has a broad, but conventional definition of qualitative research, encompassing specific methods (interviews, participant and non-participant observation, focus groups, ethnographic fieldwork) data types (narrative), and forms of analysis (Nudist, Ethnography, grounded theory, thematic categories).

CASP, like any number of other checklists (Dixon-woods et al., 2004; Jackson and Waters, 2005; Popay et al., 1998; Spencer et al., 2003) is an assessment tool developed for those unfamiliar with qualitative research. The tool presents a series of questions, focused around three broad issues: rigor, credibility, and relevance. Ten questions, concerning aims, methodology, design, subject recruitment, data collection, researcher–participant relationship, ethics (IRBS), data analysis, statement of findings, and value of research are asked. The reviewer of a study writes comments on each of these issues.

CASP implements a narrow model of qualitative inquiry. Methods are not connected to interpretive paradigms (e.g. feminism, critical theory). Multiple strategies of inquiry and analysis (case or performance studies, narrative inquiry, critical ethnography) go unidentified. Nor is the complex literature from within the interpretive tradition on evaluating qualitative research addressed (see Christians, 2005). Thus CASP offers the reviewer a small, ahistorical tool kit for reading and evaluating qualitative studies.

#### CHECKLISTS

Here Hammersley is again relevant. This is the myth of the checklist, the myth of the guideline (2005a). Consider the guidelines prepared for the British Cabinet Office (Spencer et al., 2003). This is another checklist with 16 categories (scope, timetable, design, sample, data collection, analysis, ethics, confirmability, generalizability, credibility, etc.), 80 specific criteria (clearly stated hypotheses, outcomes, justify analysis methods, triangulation, etc.), and 35 broad criteria (explicit aims, appropriate use of methods, assessment of reliability and validity, etc.).

This is old-fashioned, postpositivism, applying a soft quantitative grid (confirmability, hypotheses, credibility) to qualitative research. But there is more going on. Like CASP, the Spencer et al. toolkit introduces the notion of credibility; that is can the findings be trusted: If they can be trusted they must be confirmable, valid and reliable. Which means they can be generalized. If they are not credible the whole house of cards falls down.

Torrance exposes the underlying theory at work here, noting that 'it is a traditional, positivist model, that is the truth is out there to be discovered' (2007). Yet, as he observes, 'these scholars still can not solve the problem of epistemological incommensuration ... but ... this is little more than experts 'rating' qualitative evidence on an agreed scale so it can be included in meta-analyses of effect sizes' (2007).

## AERA

The American Education Research Association (AERA, 2006) has recently added its collective voice to the conversation, supplementing and departing from the NRC recommendations. Its 2006 guidelines for reporting on empirical social science research are also intended to foster excellence in the production of high quality research. Two global standards are offered, warrantability and transparency<sup>7</sup> (AERA, 2006: 2). Reports of research should be warranted, that is adequate evidence, which would be credible (internal validity) should be provided to justify conclusions. Reports should be transparent, making explicit the logic of inquiry used in the project. This method should produce data that have external validity, reliability, and confirmability, or objectivity. Like the NRC guidelines, these standards are to be used by peer-reviewers, research scholars, journal publishers, and in graduate education programs where researchers are trained.

There is extensive discussion of quantitative procedures (pp. 6–10), but trust is not an issue.

## TRUST

Trust is an issue for qualitative researchers. The report is explicit, asserting that:

It is the researcher's responsibility is to show the reader that the report can be trusted. This begins with the description of the evidence, the data, and the analysis supporting each interpretive claim. The warrant for the claims can be established through a variety of procedures including triangulation, asking participants to evaluate pattern descriptions, having different analysts examine the same data, (independently and collaboratively), searches for disconfirming evidence and counter-interpretations. (2006: 11)

This is all clear enough, but these validating procedures and standards are not held up for quantitative researchers. When qualitative evidence does not converge, the report recommends that

critical examination of the preexisting perspective, point of view, or standpoint of the researcher(s), of how these might have influenced the collection and analysis of evidence, and of how they were challenged during the course of data collection and analysis, is an important element in enhancing the warrant of each claim. (p. 11)

Here is the heart of the matter. The perspective of the qualitative researcher can influence the collection of evidence in such a way as to introduce a lack of trust into the research process. That presence potentially undermines the credibility and warrantability of the report. But why would the qualitative researcher's effects on the research process be greater, or less than the effects of the quantitative researcher? Doesn't the quantitative researcher have an effect on the collection, analysis and interpretation of evidence, including deciding what is evidence?! (see below).

The AERA recommendations call for the responsible use of quasi-foundational tools; that is, threats to trust can be overcome. Transparency, that is trust, is increased by clearly discussing the process of interpretation, highlighting the evidence and alternative interpretations that serve as a warrant for each claim, providing contextual commentary on each claim. When generalizations extend beyond a specific case, researchers must clearly indicate the sampling frame, population, individuals, contexts, activities, and domains to which the generalizations are intended to apply (external validity). The logic supporting such generalizations must be made clear.

A slight of hand is at work in the AERA recommendations. The intent of the report is now clear. Two things are going on at once. A familiar pattern. Qualitative research is down-graded to the status of a marginal science, second-class citizenship. Since it lacks trustworthiness, it can be used for discovery purposes, but not for the real work of science, which is verification. Only under the most rigorous of circumstances can qualitative research exhibit the qualities that would make it scientific, and even then trust will be an issue. Trust becomes a proxy for quality, transparency and warranted evidence function as proxies for objectivity.

Clearly AERA wants a space for qualitative research that is not governed by the narrow NRC, experimental and quasi-experimental guidelines. We all want this. To its credit, AERA wants a broad-based, multi-method concept of quality. But they falter in asserting that empirical research reports should be warranted and transparent. These are criteria for doing business as usual. No wonder SREE was created. AERA's educational science does not require randomized control experiments. SREE's does.

#### RE-READING TRUST AND ETHICS

Trust in this discourse re-surfaces as a proxy for more than quality. It spills over to the researcher who does research that lacks trust. Untrustworthy persons lie, misrepresent, cheat, engage in fraud, alter documents. They are not governed

by measurement and statistical procedures that are objective and free of bias. They may not be shady characters, they may be well-intended, gifted actors, poets, fiction writers, performers, but they are not scientists! Qualitative researchers are not to be trusted because their standpoints can influence what they study, and report. Somehow quantitative researchers are freed from these influences. This of course is a sham!

By implication, quantitative scientists are being charged with fraud, with misrepresenting their data. This may be because many qualitative researchers don't have data and findings, tables and charts, statistics and numbers. We have stories, narratives, excerpts from interviews. We perform our interpretations and invite audiences to experience these performances, to live their way into the scenes, moments and lives we are writing, and talking about. Our empirical materials can't be fudged, mis-represented, altered or distorted, because they are life experiences. They are ethno-dramas.

#### APPLES TURNED INTO ORANGES: TURNING INTERPRETATIONS INTO DATA

Like the NRC, AERA's ethical guidelines focus on issues relevant to reporting results. Authors have an obligation to address the ethical decisions that shaped their research, including how the inquiry was designed, executed, and organized. Incentives for participating, consent waivers and confidentiality agreements, and conflicts of interest should be presented and discussed. Reporting should be accurate, free of plagiarism, fully accessible to others, and without falsification or fabrication of data or results. Data should be presented in such a way that any qualified researcher with a copy of the relevant data could reproduce the results.

Thus are interpretive materials turned into data. The interpretive process becomes an exercise in seeking patterns of evidence, presenting evidence in a way that will engender trust on the part of the reader, while avoiding charges of misrepresentation, or fabrication (more on ethics below). But this is not how qualitative researchers work.

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It is as if the NRC, SREE, and AERA guidelines were written in a time warp. Over the last three decades the field of qualitative research has become a interdisciplinary field in its own right. The interpretive and critical paradigms, in their multiple forms, are central to this movement. Complex literatures are now attached to research methodologies, strategies of inquiry, interpretive paradigms, and criteria for reading and evaluating inquiry itself. Sadly, little of this literature is evident in any of the recent national documents. It seems that the qualitative community is hemmed in from all sides. But before this judgment is accepted, the 'for whom' question must be asked; that is high quality science, or evidence for whom? (Cheek, 2006). NRC, AERA and SREE's umbrellas are too small. We need a larger tent.

### *The qualitative inquiry community*

There are tensions over the politics of evidence within the interpretive community: (1) Interpretivists dismiss postpositivists; (2) poststructuralists dismiss interpretivists; and now (3) the postinterpretivists dismiss the interpretivists (Preissle, 2006: 692; also Hammersley, 2005b; Hodkinson, 2004; MacLure, 2006). Some postpositivists are drawn to the SBR standards movement, seeking to develop mixed or multiple methodological strategies that will conform to the new demands for improving research quality. Others reject the gold standard movement, and argue for a set of understandings unique to the interpretive, or postinterpretive tradition (St. Pierre and Roulston, 2006). Atkinson and Delamont (2006) call for a return to the classics in the Chicago School tradition. The American Education Research Association (2006) aims to strike a middle ground, neither too postpositivist, or too interpretivist.

The immediate effects of this conversation start at home, in departments and in graduate education programs where PhD's are produced, and tenure for qualitative research scholars is granted. Many fear that the call for SBR will drown out instruction, scholarship and the granting of tenure in the qualitative tradition, or confine it to a narrow brand of interpretive work (Eisenhart, 2006: 697). Worse yet it could lead to a narrow concept of orthodoxy.<sup>8</sup>

#### RESISTANCE

We must resist the pressures for a single gold standard, even as we endorse conversations about evidence, inquiry and empirically warranted conclusions (Lincoln and Cannella, 2004). We can not let one group define the key terms in the conversation. To do otherwise is to allow the SBR group to define the moral and epistemological terrain that we stand on. Neither they, nor the government own the word science. Habermas (1972) anticipated this nearly 40 years ago:

The link between empiricism, positivism and the global audit culture is not accidental and it is more than just technical. Such technical approaches deflect attention away from the deeper issues of value and purpose. They make radical critiques much more difficult to mount ... and they render largely invisible partisan approaches to research under the politically useful pretense that judgments are about objective quality only. In the process human needs and human rights are trampled upon and democracy as we need it is destroyed. (Habermas, 1972: 122; 2006: 193; see also Smith and Hodkinson, 2005: 930)

Bourdieu elaborates (1998: 90):

The dominants, technocrats, and empiricists of the right and the left are hand in glove with reason and the universal .... More and more rational, scientific technical justifications, always in the name of objectivity, are relied upon. In this way the audit culture perpetuates itself.

There is more than one version of disciplined, rigorous inquiry – counter-science, little science, unruly science, practical science – and such inquiry need

not go by the name of science. We must have a model of disciplined, rigorous, thoughtful, reflective inquiry, a 'postinterpretivism that seeks meaning but less innocently, that seeks liberation but less naively, and that ... reaches toward understanding, transformation and justice' (Preissle, 2006: 692). It does not need to be called a science, contested or otherwise, as some have proposed (Eisenhart, 2006; Preissle, 2006; St. Pierre and Rouleston, 2006).

Lather (2006) paraphrasing slightly extends the argument:

The commitment to disciplined inquiry opens the space for the pursuit of 'inexact knowledges' (p. 787), a disciplined inquiry that matters, applied qualitative research ... that can engage strategically with the limits and the possibilities of the uses of research for social policy (p. 789). The goal is a critical 'counter-science' .... that troubles what we take for granted as the good in fostering understanding, reflection and action (p. 787). We need a broader framework where such key terms as science, data, evidence, field, method, analysis, knowledge, truth, are no longer defined from within a narrow policy-oriented, positivistic framework.

### *A new terrain, trouble with the elephant*

Lets return to the elephant in the living room. Consider the parable of the blind men and the elephant.<sup>9</sup> Lillian Quigley (1996):

In my children's book, *The Blind Men and the Elephant* (1959) I retell the ancient fable of six blind men who visit the palace of the Rajah and encounter an elephant for the first time. Each touches the elephant, and announces his discovery. The first blind person touches the side of the elephant and reports that it feels like a wall. The second touches the trunk and says an elephant is like a snake. The third man touches the tusk and says an elephant is like a spear. The fourth person touches a leg and says it feels like a tree. The fifth man touches an ear and says it must be a fan, while the sixth man touches the tail and says how thin, an elephant is like a rope.

There are multiple versions of the elephant in this parable. Multiple lessons. We can never know the true nature of things. We are each blinded by our own perspective. Truth is always partial.

To summarize:

*Truth One:* The elephant is not one thing. If we call SBR the elephant, then according to the parable, we can each know only our version of SBR. For SBR advocates, the elephant is two things, an all-knowing being who speaks to us, and a way of knowing that produces truths about life. How can a thing be two things at the same time?

*Truth Two:* For skeptics, we are like the blind persons in the parable. We only see partial truths. There is no God's view of the totality, no uniform way of knowing.

*Truth Three:* Our methodological and moral biases have so seriously blinded us that we can never understand another blind person's position. Even if the elephant called SBR speaks, our biases may prohibit us for hearing what she says. In turn, her biases prevent her from hearing what we say.

*Truth Four:* If we are all blind, if there is no God, and if there are multiple versions of the elephant then we are all fumbling around in the world just doing the best we can.



## TWO OTHER VERSIONS OF THE ELEPHANT

This is the blind person's version of the elephant. There are at least two other versions, 2.1 and version 2.2. Both versions follow from another fable; now the elephant refers to a painfully problematic situation, thing or person in one's life space. Rather than confront the thing, and make changes, persons find that it is easier to engage in denial, to act like the elephant isn't in the room. This can be unhealthy, because the thing may be destructive. It can produce co-dependency. We need the negative presence of the elephant in order to feel good about ourselves.

This cuts two ways at once, hence versions 2.1 and 2.2. In Fable 2.1, SBR advocates treat qualitative research as if it were an elephant in their living room. They have ignored our traditions, our values, our methodologies, they have not read our journals, or our handbooks, or our monographs. They have not even engaged our discourses about SBR. Like the six blind men, they have acted as if they could create us in their own eye. They say we produce findings that can not be trusted, we are radical relativists, we think anything goes, why with our values we would not have stopped Hitler!

They dismiss us when we tell them they only know one version of who we are. When we tell them their biases prevent them from understanding what we do they assert that we are wrong and they are right.

In Fable 2.2 the elephant is located in our living room. With notable exceptions, we have tried to ignore this presence. Denial has fed codependency. We need the negative presence of SBR to define who we are. For example, we have not taken up the challenge of better educating policy-makers showing them how qualitative research and our views of practical science, interpretation, and performance ethics can positively contribute to projects embodying restorative justice, equity and better schooling (Preissle, 2006; Stanfield, 2006). We have not engaged policy-makers in a dialogue about alternative ways of judging and evaluating quality research. Nor have we engaged SBR advocates in a dialogue about these same issues (but see St. Pierre, 2006). And, they have often declined the invitation to join us in a conversation. As a consequence, we have allowed the SBR elephant to set the terms of the conversation.

If we are to move forward positively we have to get beyond Fable 2.2, beyond elephants, blind persons, and structures of denial. We must create a new narrative, a narrative of passion, and commitment, a narrative which teaches others that ways of knowing are always already partial, moral and political. This narrative will allow us to put the elephant in proper perspective. Here are some of the certain things we can build our new fable around:

1. We have an ample supply of methodological rules and interpretive guidelines.
2. They are open to change and to differing interpretation, and this is how it should be.
3. There is no longer a single gold standard for qualitative work.
4. We value open-peer reviews in our journals.
5. Our empirical materials are performative. They are not commodities to be bought, sold and consumed.

6. Our feminist, communitarian ethics are not governed by IRBs.
7. Our science is open-ended, unruly, disruptive (MacLure, 2006; Stronach et al., 2007: 197).
8. Inquiry is always political and moral.
9. Objectivity and evidence are political and ethical terms.

We live in a depressing historical moment, violent spaces, unending wars against persons of color, repression, the falsification of evidence, the collapse of critical, democratic discourse, repressive neo-liberalism, disguised as dispassionate objectivity prevails. Global efforts to impose a new orthodoxy on critical social science inquiry must be resisted, a hegemonic politics of evidence cannot be allowed. Too much is at stake.

#### NOTES

1. Audit culture refers to a technology and a system of accounting that measures outcomes, and assesses quality in terms of so-called objective criteria, such as test scores. Some argue that the global audit culture implements conservative, neo-liberal conceptions of governmentality (Bourdieu, 1998: 90; Habermas, 1972: 122; 2006: 193).
2. Lather (2004a, 2004b) offers a history and critical reading of this alphabet soup of acronyms CC (Cochrane Collaboration), C2 (Campbell Collaboration), AIR (American Institutes for Research), WWC (What Works Clearinghouse), IES (Institute of Education Science). (see <http://w-w-c.org/whoware/overview.html#ies>). There has been a recent move within CC and C2 to create protocols for evaluating qualitative research studies (see Briggs, 2006; National CASP Collaboration, 2006; also Bell, 2006, and below).
3. Over the past four decades the discourse on triangulation, multiple operationalism, and mix-method models has become quite complex and nuanced (see Saukko, 2003: 32; and Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003 for reviews). Each decade has taken up triangulation and redefined it to meet perceived needs.
4. The common thread that exists between WWC, and C2, is The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Reading First (Reading.First@ed. Gov) Acts. These acts required a focus on identifying and using scientifically-based research in designing and implementing educational programs (*What Works Clearinghouse*: <http://w-w-c.org/whoware/overview.html#ies>).
5. Ironically, the blind peer review recommendation flies in the face of a recent CC study which argues that there is little hard evidence to show that blind peer reviews improve the quality of research (Jefferson et al., 2006; White, 2003; see also Judson, 2004: 244–86; White, 2003: 241). Indeed the Cochrane researchers found few studies examining this presumed effect.
6. Their first annual conference (2–4 March 2008) is outcomes based, calling for rigorous studies of reading, writing, and language skills, mathematics, and science achievement, social and behavioral competencies, dropout prevention and school completion (see [inquiries@educationaleffectiveness.org](mailto:inquiries@educationaleffectiveness.org)).
7. Warrantability and transparency are key terms in the new managerialism, which is evidence-based, and audit-driven; that is policy decisions should be based on evidence that warrants policy recommendations, and research procedures should be transparently accountable (Hammersley, 2004: 141). Transparency is also a criterion advanced by the Cochrane Qualitative Methods Group (Briggs, 2006).

8. In the last two decades, qualitative researchers have gone from having fewer than three journals dedicated to their work to now having 20 or more (Chenail, 2007).
9. The text that follows borrows from and paraphrases Koukl (2007).

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