

Thinking Big (and Critically) about Qualitative Research: Trends, Visions and Challenges for the Future of Qualitative Social Science.

Lynda Cheshire

Associate Professor in Sociology

School of Social Science, The University of Queensland

Email: l.cheshire@uq.edu.au

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Introduction

I would like to thank the team from ACSPRI for the kind invitation to speak here today. When Betsy first contacted me about giving a keynote address, the brief was to have a past, present and future orientation in social science methods. As a qualitative researcher, my task was to consider developments in qualitative research with an eye to the future. In initially thinking about this brief, I considered some of the key trends we are witnessing in qualitative research with a view to reflecting upon where qualitative research sits in relation to them and how they inform the way we undertake our practice as qualitative researchers. I identified three immediately. First, the emergence of the 'big data' era; second the debates around data archiving and sharing and the responses of qualitative researchers to these new practices; and thirdly, new technological innovations in the collection and analysis of qualitative data, notably the use of online sources.

But when I reflected and read further, I realised that what I was focussing on here was qualitative *data* not qualitative inquiry or qualitative research. And I also reflected that focussing on qualitative data rather than qualitative inquiry was problematic for three reasons. The first is that it creates the impression that research methods and data can be deployed, generated and analysed in isolation of the theoretical and philosophical context in which they are embedded, and thus neutral and objective rather than socially and politically constituted. I return to this point later in the presentation. Second is that the new kinds of data and analysis that we are currently getting excited about are only rendered problematic when we think about them in the context of broader issues of methodology, rather than straightforward method. If we subject qualitative research to critique on its own terms – most specifically its hermeneutic foundations of understanding and interpretation – we begin to see the flaws and inconsistencies in the way qualitative methods are designed and deployed, particularly within a research culture dominated by big data, metrics and the scientific method. And third, that when one starts thinking about these issues, it is the status and future of qualitative inquiry, rather than the qualitative method, which is more intricate, complex and interesting.

What I plan to do in this address today is to spend a little time examining current debates within qualitative research, particularly as they relate to the contemporary research climate that celebrates big data and privileges the measurement of research quality and outcomes through metrics that arguably separate research methods from research methodology and diminish the contribution of qualitative research as a humanistic endeavour. In order to understand the salience of these concerns, I want to locate them within the longstanding awkward relationship that qualitative research has with its rejection of positivism on the one hand, and its retention of the 'structuring concepts' (St Pierre, 2014) and processes of positivist scientific inquiry on the other. For postmodern feminist scholars, the only way out of this is a future that is anti-methodological or post-qualitative, but for those of us more comfortable with our role as social scientists, even while we strive to remain reflexive and critical of our practice, there are ways we can engage with big data scientists and demonstrate the importance of our work without letting

go of either our values or our practices.

Defining Qualitative Research

Preparing for this address also forced me to think once more about what I mean by the term qualitative research. The position I take with qualitative research is that it cannot be defined solely by the methods through which data are generated – traditionally the interview, observation, focus group, diaries and documents but also, and increasingly, through online versions of these techniques as well as new methods such as blogging, cyber-ethnography and online content analysis. Nor does it refer to the kinds of data generated through these methods, which are qualitative in form – textual data in the form of interview transcripts, field diaries, document or online posts; or visual data in the form of images, video, objects, the built environment and so on. Rather, what defines qualitative research are the philosophical assumptions that underlie it and its provenance as the product of a rejection of the scientific method for the study of society in favour of a more humanistic approach which emphasises the actors' perspective (Alasuutari, 2010).

Qualitative research can be understood in terms of the properties of the social world that we are interested in – the meanings, experiences and perspectives of the people under study – which we understand to be socially constructed within particular cultural, political, social, economic and historic contexts. Because of the requirement to see through the eyes of the other, a degree of closeness to or immersion in the research site is advocated so that behaviour is understood in the context of the meaning systems through which it takes place. Qualitative research also draws on an interpretivist epistemology, rejecting claims that the social scientist can properly know and explain how the world works as if there is a single, unitary world that we can grasp with careful analysis. Instead it recognises that the best we can do is to interpret or understand the actions and perspectives of different social actors. And, that since we can never know how they really think or feel, nor step outside the social world to study it as a scientist might study an organism under a microscope, our understanding is always partial, contingent and influenced by our own subjectivities.

In providing an historical overview of qualitative research, Brinkmann et al. (2014) identify three paradigms that have been most influential to its development. The first is hermeneutics and the art of interpretation. While the natural sciences can explain nature, the social world can only be *understood*. Second is phenomenology and the goal of understanding phenomena as they are experienced by thinking and acting human beings. Employing the technique of reduction – meaning 'bracketing' out any rationality or scientific foundation to the phenomena in question – phenomenology gives us the tools to understand the actor's perspective of a given phenomenon, regardless of whether that perspective is logical, ethical, legitimate or rational. The final set of influences come from microsociology, which emanates from the Chicago School of Sociology and its pursuit of sociology and the social sciences as an empirical rather than scholarly endeavour. In the tradition of Garfinkle, Goffman and others, this branch of qualitative inquiry argues that the primordial object of social inquiry should be what people *do* (rather than what they say or indeed what we think they do) and the meanings they give to their everyday lives through interaction with others. While qualitative research is a diverse form of social inquiry containing many theories and approaches, it is these three strands of humanistic inquiry that help define what we mean by qualitative research.

Positioning Qualitative Research

What we are all generally aware of is the way qualitative research stands in relation to quantitative research. As undergraduate students, we were most likely subjected to the

dichotomies of objectivism versus constructivism, and positivism versus interpretivism. We would also have had the odd lecture on critical social science, feminism and poststructuralism, although these paradigms remain less dominant in methods teachings. For qualitative researchers, positivism has long been a pejorative term – one that almost causes us to sneer as we say it. Yet the distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches appears more important to qualitative researchers than it does to quantitative, primarily – I would argue – because the relationship between interpretivist humanistic inquiry and the hegemony of the natural scientific method has been, and continues to be, problematic for qualitative researchers. On the one hand, there has been an explicit rejection among qualitative researchers of what Bryman (1984) calls the ‘paraphernalia’ of positivism and its preoccupation with truth through objectivity, detachment, replicability, generalizability and causality. On the other hand, qualitative researchers have not only had to contend with internal debates about how the quality of qualitative research can be asserted in the absence of these (albeit inappropriate) criteria, but they have also felt obliged to defend and justify the importance of their work to funding agencies and policymakers who have a clear preference for measurement, causality, large populations and statistical significance.

The rather problematic relationship between positivism and qualitative research is reflected in Pattie Lather’s account of the various ‘turns’ that have taken place within qualitative research in a paper entitled *Methodology 21: what do we do in the afterward?* (2013). She captures this movement with what she describes as 1.0, 2.0 and 3.0 methodologies.

According to Lather, Qual 1.0 is the conventional interpretivist inquiry that emerged from sociology and cultural anthropology with its emphasis on the ‘humanistic subject who has an authentic voice, transparent descriptions of lived experience, and the generally untroubled belief that better methods and richer descriptions can get closer to the truth’ (2013: 635).

In Qual 2.0, she argues, qualitative research begins to acknowledge messy texts; the presence of multiple voices, some of which are being subjugated by those with more power; reflexivity; and discourse. Nevertheless it ‘remains within the humanistic enclosure, grounded in humanist concepts of language, reality, knowledge, power [and] truth’ It also becomes:

... centred, disciplined, regulated, and normalized as qualitative handbooks, textbooks and journals create “moments” and “designs”, and fix “the research process” so that it becomes possible to *know it in advance*, for example, to offer a sequence of courses on qualitative inquiry, to teach someone how to “do a phenomenology”, and to teach someone how to analyze qualitative data (Lather, 2013: 635).

Qual 2.0 is epitomised by the precarious relationship between science and humanism that I alluded to earlier. Elizabeth St Pierre (2014), for example, points to the way qualitative research claims to be interpretivist or humanist in its epistemology, but then retains positivist structuring concepts such as ‘bias’, ‘data coding’ and ‘triangulation’ even while introducing phenomenological concepts like ‘voice’, ‘lived experience’ and ‘authenticity’ (p.6). The effect, she argues, is that:

... Qualitative methodology has become a recognizable structure, a discursive and material formation with its own rules and regularities for producing objects of knowledge, including people. Following Foucault (1971/1972), one might conclude that it had reached the threshold of a positivity that was ‘accepted, institutionalized, [and] transmitted’ (p.178) (St Pierre, 2014: 6).

These rules of qualitative research basically revolve around three dualisms, as Schwandt (1991) described in his account of attempts to deal with ‘unresolved tensions’ in qualitative research. The first is an attempt to maintain the opposition of subjectivity and objectivity, which researchers seek to achieve by acknowledging the world is made up of subjective meaning but

believing they can disengage from that world and study it in an objective manner. Second, and related to this, are attempts to sustain a separation between the object of investigation and the investigator as if the researcher can stand outside the world of which he or she is part to conduct an objective study of it. Finally, there is the distinction between facts and values and the erroneous belief that researchers can investigate meanings and values, but do so in a value free manner.

One of the most profound manifestations of this approach is the set of 'Basic Rules for "Scientific" Qualitative Research' produced by King, Keohane and Verba in 1994. They argued that qualitative researchers need to approach their work in a more rigorous and scientific manner, which basically means as much as possible adhering to the conventions of quantitative research. They suggest that qualitative research shares the same 'logic of inference' as quantitative research and they set out a series of rules for rigorous scientific qualitative research:

1. Construct falsifiable theories (choose theories that could be wrong then test them)
2. Build theories that are internally consistent (if two hypotheses in your theory contradict one another, it can't be upheld)
3. Dependent variables should be dependent
4. Do not select observations based on the dependent variable so the dependent variable is constant
5. Maximise concreteness (avoid unobservable concepts)
6. To make theory falsifiable, choose one that has as many observable implications as possible
7. To better evaluate theory, collect data on as many observable implications as possible
8. The more evidence we can find in varied contexts, the more powerful our explanation becomes
9. State theories that are as encompassing as possible
10. All data and analyses should, insofar as possible, be replicable.

King, Keohane and Verba (1994) Designing Social Inquiry: Inference in Qualitative Research.

This 'qualitative template' has been countered by researchers who call out this "quantitative imperialism" for what it is' (Lather, 2013: 636). Aside from the fact that this advice is difficult to comprehend for most qualitative researchers who describe their work using a different language, it encapsulates the major issues associated with assessing the quality of qualitative research according to quantitative criteria. These problems arise as a result of the double hermeneutic in qualitative research and the need to understand that *if* researchers are a part of the social world that they study and that *if* meanings about that world are socially constructed and contextually specific – as interpretivist social scientists claim – then how is it possible for a researcher to stand outside of that world and study it objectively? What enables a researcher to transcend the subjectivity that we attribute to research participants – and indeed continue to emphasise in our work? Such claims of 'epistemic sovereignty' (Rouse, 1994: 103) amount to what Donna Haraway terms 'God tricks' of seeing everywhere from nowhere (1988: 581).

The challenge facing qualitative researchers, then, becomes this: we can reject scientific criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research because they are inconsistent with our philosophical stance. But if we do that, how can we demonstrate the methodological rigor of our work? Is it important that we do so? As Denzin and Lincoln pointed out more than 20 years ago (1994), these dilemmas have created something of a legitimacy crisis in qualitative research. If we cannot distinguish between good and bad qualitative research, we risk the challenge of all qualitative research being labelled fictitious, subjective, false, theoretically and methodologically weak, 'soft' and engaged in naval gazing.

I encounter this a lot among students' work whereby students complete a wonderful thesis and then undermine the whole value of what they have just done by arguing that their work is not generalisable, based on too small a population and/or only one – often atypical – case study. I

have provided some examples below, but slightly changed some of the wording to preserve the identity of the authors:

... that the research was only undertaken in Sydney limits the generalisability of the findings to Sydney, and not the rest of Australia, but further research could be conducted in other states in the future.

The 'uniqueness and non-typicality' of the three case study sites, along with the qualitative methodology, limit the application of the research findings. To address this, I recommend the use of survey research in the future to generate research data that has broader applicability.

This study is not a cross-sectional collection of data to generalise the findings of immigrants' settlement experiences beyond the immediate research site ...

I think this is a misunderstanding of what qualitative researchers have been saying about the limits to knowing in their work and one only needs to read a good qualitative methods textbook to see that there are clear guidelines for arguing the importance and contribution of a qualitative study beyond the individual case. However, it illustrates the ambivalence that still exists among qualitative researchers about where their work sits in relation to the science of quantitative research and about the appropriate indicators of research quality for qualitative research. This is something I return to later.

So we turn now to more recent developments in qualitative research, which Lather positions as Qual 3.0. Qual 3.0 is an attempt to deal with the methodological tensions in qualitative research using poststructuralist theories. First off, it rejects outright what poststructuralist researchers see as positivist indicators of quality. The most coherent articulation of this new position was *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, first published in the early 1990s. Through this collection, as a Doctoral student, I learnt to deconstruct taken for granted qualitative tools and concepts on the basis of their problematic assumptions about the fixity of the world and the ability to know it, even while they were viewed as consistent with an interpretivist paradigm. From Laurel Richardson, I learnt that triangulation assumes there is a fixed point of reality at which all perspectives meet. And that the crystal is a much better metaphor than the triangle for conceiving how different methods simply give us different perspectives that, in Richardson's words, 'reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colours, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions (1994: 522). I also learnt from Richardson that writing is not a neutral process of recording the facts, but that our writing contains complex and hidden political and ideological agendas. Even the concept of 'field site' becomes a complex terrain that cannot exist, nor be presented, as an objective space that can be defined, entered, and written about as if it exist independently of the researcher. And transcription has also been revealed to be a 'critical step in the social production of scientific knowledge rather than an accurate record of the interaction that took place.

More than this, I also learnt how power is bound up in subjectivity and language, such that researchers who claim it is possible to stand above disputes of competing truths - in a position of sovereignty to what is being observed - are suppressing alternative forms of knowledge by investing their own interpretation with the privilege of truth and power that is traditionally attributed to the natural sciences (Rouse 1994, 103). Foucault (1994: 43) expressed this beautifully in his critique of Western Marxism when he asked:

What types of knowledge do you want to disqualify in the very instant of your demand: "is it a science"? Which speaking, discoursing subjects - which subjects of experience and knowledge - do you then want to "diminish" when you say: "I who conduct this discourse am conducting a scientific discourse, and I am a scientist"? ... When I see you straining to

establish the scientificity of Marxism ... you are investing Marxist discourses and those who uphold them with the effects of a power which the West, since Medieval times has attributed to science and has reserved for those engaged in scientific discourse (1994: 43).

For Lather, the development of this postmodern agenda for qualitative research stalled as qualitative researchers moved to defend their work and the theories underpinning them in the wake of tighter funding regimes; an increased reliance upon metrics as a driver of individual and university performance; an audit culture among universities and funding agencies that increases accountability of publicly-funded research money; the requirement that research should have a measurable policy outcome or 'impact'; and the fanfare over big data (Duberley, 2015). I want to look at two of these trends and their effects upon qualitative research in turn.

The Neoliberal Research Environment and its Impact on Qualitative Research

There is no disputing the tightening climate that researchers work in, the demands placed upon us, or the very real impact that this has on the way we conduct our research. For example, we have experienced the former Minister Jamie Briggs, Chair of the beautifully entitled 'Scrutiny of Government Waste Committee' threatening to audit – and I quote – 'increasingly ridiculous research grants and reprioritising funding through the ARC to deliver funds where they are really needed' (Briggs, 2013). Briggs identified a number of projects that, in his opinion, that 'do little, if anything, to advance Australia's research needs'. We have also seen attempts by the ARC to impose a journal ranking system that assigns a grade to journals based on their perceived quality. The ERA ranking system was withdrawn after scholars complained about its 'positivistic logic' (St Pierre, 2012: 484). However, the University of Queensland still continues to use a journal ranking system of its own to determine staff publishing performance, although no one can seem to gain access to either the full list or the logic behind the assessment of individual journals.

In addition, UQ has introduced the 'q-index' which assigns our scholarly work to a single number based on a complex formula that assigns a value to our grants, publications and Research Higher Degree supervision and completions. With research output points, we are awarded extra marks if the journal is ranked ERA A*, even though ERA rankings no longer exist. So, for example, a paper with three authors in the A* journal, *Journal of Rural Studies* gives me one research output point, but a similar paper in the journal *Mobilities* – ranked C despite being a highly esteemed journal and also with three authors – gives me 0.17 points. The message for anyone needing to care about this for their promotion prospects is this: only target A* journals.

Qualitative researchers have expressed concern about the particular challenges this places on their research as they are driven by institutionalised norms to secure publications in prestigious journals, many of which often do not accept qualitative papers. In an article reflecting on the future of qualitative research, British scholar Joanne Duberley says this has led to an increase in the 'standardisation' of qualitative research and the formulation of scientific criteria for evaluating its quality which tend to adhere to post-positive frameworks in order to make qualitative research 'acceptable to those with more quantitative leanings' (2015: 340). Nancarrow and colleagues (2005) go further to suggest that qualitative research is being 'McDonaldized', while Donnelley et al (2013) believe it has been 'sanitised'. Lather (2013: 636) speaks of the 'disciplining of qualitative research', somewhat problematically – we might argue – through new technologies of the self that induce qualitative researchers to voluntarily adhere to scientific conventions of linearity, deductivity and objectivity in the desire to maintain legitimacy for their work. Such practices, Pratt (2009) argues, 'serves to obscure the fluid and emergent character of qualitative writing, creating what he sees as "the worst of all worlds"' (cited in Donnelley et al. 2013: 7).

My own position is less pessimistic, or at least less selective in the effects of the neoliberal

university on everyday research practices. While there certainly are some prestigious journals that rarely accept papers based on qualitative work, they are equally unlikely to publish work based on smaller scale quantitative studies, preferring instead large-scale and longitudinal datasets and highly sophisticated analytic techniques that require high-level statistical skills. Most good journals regularly publish qualitative work, providing it tells an important story and, from experience, I do not believe that qualitative research does any worse with ARC funding than other approaches, although others may have a different view on this. But I do agree that qualitative research is taken most seriously when it presents itself as a scientific method, including as part of a mixed methods approach; and that the rise of large datasets – or big data – has implications for qualitative research, many of which are positive and exciting. I turn to this second point below.

Big Data and Qualitative Research

This brings me to one of the main themes of today's presentation. In thinking about the future of qualitative research one cannot look past the emergence of big data as the new 'big thing' in research. Just to ensure we are all on the same page, let us be clear on what is meant by big data. boyd and Crawford (2012: 663) define big data as a 'cultural, technological and scholarly phenomenon' that rests on the interplay of three things. The first is technology: 'maximising computational power and algorithmic accuracy to gather, analyze, link, and compare large data sets' (ibid). These datasets are huge in volume, consisting now of terabyte or petabytes of data. The second is the use of new, and increasingly sophisticated, techniques in data analysis. As boyd and Crawford (2012) note, the main point of big data is not the size of the dataset since researchers have long been working with large volumes of data such as census data. Rather the newness of big data comes from the newly evolving capacity of researchers to 'search, aggregate and cross reference large datasets' (boyd and Crawford, 2012: 663). Finally, they point to the mythology surrounding big datasets: 'the widespread belief that large datasets offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, and which are imbued with an aura of truth, objectivity and accuracy' (ibid).

Big data in the social sciences typically takes the form of social media interactions such as Facebook records, twitter feeds, You tube or Expedia posts and comments; health records and other government and administrative data on clients and users; digital traces left by people, such as smart phones that record the history of their use or data that tracks navigation through websites. Market researchers are making use of databases of credit card sales and other information to make predictions about your purchasing habits and target their marketing strategies. While big data has been embraced enthusiastically by many researchers, qualitative analysts are more circumspect of its ability to answer the kinds of questions traditionally posed by interpretive social scientists and sceptical of the power imbued in the truth claims that emerge from big data, seemingly without the contamination of researcher interventions or agendas.

Let us turn first to the challenges posed by big data to the way we conduct qualitative research. According to critical analysts, there is plenty to be concerned about. The first concern revolves around the mythology of big data that boyd and Crawford speak of and the belief that large data and computationally derived correlations can speak for themselves devoid of human bias and subjectivity (Kitchen, 2013). There is an assumption that the data generated and the correlations between them are inherently meaningful; that we no longer need a priori theories or hypotheses to drive our analysis. Summing up this position, Kitchen suggests that big data encourages naïve empiricism and pseudo-positivism (Kitchen, 2013). Such concerns have not been helped by provocative writings heralding the so-called end of theory, as outlined in the following excerpt from Chris Anderson, then Editor of the magazine *Wired*:

This is a world where massive amounts of data and applied mathematics replace every

other tool that might be brought to bear. Out with every theory of human behavior, from linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology, and psychology. Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves (Anderson, 2008).

boyd and Crawford take issue with what they see as Anderson's 'sweeping dismissal of all ... theories and disciplines' (2008: 666). They say:

... it reveals an arrogant undercurrent in many big data debates where other forms of analysis are too easily sidelined. Methods for ascertaining why people do things, write things, or make things are lost in the sheer volume of numbers. This is not a space that has been welcoming to older forms of intellectual craft' (2008: 666).

Qualitative researchers complain about the positivist bias in big data by virtue of the statistical techniques often deployed to manage large datasets. This means that even greater value is placed upon quantitative data while qualitative is increasingly devalued. Further, when qualitative research is considered within the big data project, it is often decoupled from its disciplinary roots in the way Anderson suggests, such that there is a separation of method from methodology. As Smith (2014) observes, the result is that methods such as interviews and field observation are taken out of the interpretive context in which they are embedded and given the appearance of being neutral tools that can be adopted in any context for any purpose. It is only by paying attention to the way methods are informed by particular paradigms or traditions, Smith argues, that 'deeper and less readily avoided difficulties' become more apparent (p.190).

Smith also points out that big data is analytically distant from what 'actual people actually do' (2014: 191) and the meanings they give to their actions. In other words, he suggests, 'precisely that which is social in the first instance – the practice, rather than the aggregate – is missed or lost' (Smith, 2014: 191). What we get a picture of is the product or outcome of social action, but not the work that goes into producing it (ten Have, 2004). There is a worry, then, that humanist conceptions of society are being eclipsed and that the expertise of the social scientist as interpreter of human action and human knowledge is being devalued (Smith, 2014). Added to this, the hype over big data can marginalise small data studies: a risk that applies particularly to qualitative research with its focus on richness and depth rather than scale and breadth. And finally, the marginalisation of qualitative research within the big data agenda – and the critique and rejection of big data by the qualitative community – runs the risk of solidifying the quantitative-qualitative divide that we have all worked to overcome. As boyd and Crawford put it (2008: 669): 'Big data risk re-inscribing established divisions in ... long-running debates about scientific method and the legitimacy of social science and humanistic inquiry'.

The Place of Qualitative Research in Big Data

Nevertheless, there are opportunities for qualitative researchers to engage with big data and to make an important contribution on their own terms, either through harnessing big data to their own research agendas or by highlighting the benefits of 'small data' that are complementary to the patterns observed. To begin with, big data contains considerable qualitative material that can be utilised by qualitative researchers to answer questions about the routines, practices, patterns and discourses of social action. Through social media such as Facebook and online fora, we can learn about the way relationships with others and self are reflexively formed and practiced in new ways, as Smith (2015) revealed in a recent PhD thesis. Through administrative records, we can gain access to naturally occurring or user-generated data which is unmediated by the interventions of the researcher. We get to see the work done in the production of data by unreflexive practitioners who often have no expectation that their words and practices will be

scrutinised by a researcher. There is a richness to the data in terms of the insights gained about the categories and concepts used by administrators to describe the phenomena and the people they work with which may not otherwise be revealed to researchers through an interview.

In addition, qualitative administrative data provides opportunities to access hard-to-reach populations who might otherwise be reluctant to participate in an interview or survey. There is a sense that marginalised populations – indigenous people, social housing tenants, disadvantaged neighbourhoods, low-income schools – are being over-researched. Having access to qualitatively derived administrative and other data helps overcome this problem while simultaneously granting new insights.

Of course, there are ethical dilemmas that arise from the use of administrative records containing personal information about clients and the unsolicited observations of administrative staff. This is particularly salient with qualitative research given that it does not aggregate records in the way quantitative research does, but maintains the detail and complexity of individual stories. There is also the issue of gaining access to such data given the ethical sensitivities involved, and also the fact that these datasets require significant cleaning in order to be suitable for sharing with a researcher. In my own work, I spent more than three years negotiating access to data from the Queensland Government's Dispute Resolution Branch (DRB) from which we now have 15 years of recorded neighbour disputes written up by DRB staff as they hear the accounts provided by disputing neighbours. The dataset had to be de-identified by DRB staff before it could be handed over because of privacy requirements, and this was an extremely lengthy process which DRB only considered worthwhile because of the potential insights they might obtain from letting a research team interrogate their material. There is also the challenge of analysing large volumes of qualitative data which, while assisted by computer software such as Nvivo, remains an interpretive process that cannot be conducted by computation algorithms.

Smith (2014) says that the greatest contribution that can be made by qualitative researchers to the interrogation of big data is in its 'attention to the practices, routines and activities in and through which 'patterns', 'traces' and 'correlations' (for example) are brought into being, in actual settings by actual people's actions' (p.183). The value of qualitative research, then, is not so much the way it can be brought in as a handmaiden to big data analysis, but rather what is distinct about it. Smith's approach is heavily informed by the ethnomethodological tradition and he identifies two examples of the sorts of contributions that qualitative researchers might make. The first would be studies of the actual activities of actual people working with big data – the everyday practices of air traffic controllers or CCTV operators, focusing on their professions and the situational nature of how they see, do and talk about their activities. Alternatively, researchers might 'follow the data' by observing and describing what is known, and constructed as knowable, about a population and how those data are created used and acted upon.

Further, qualitative research can complement big data by giving rich detail and context to the quantitative findings by placing social relations and social action within their specific historical and cultural contexts. Tricia Wang (2013) in a blog on big data and ethnography refers to Clifford Geertz' notion of thick data – or thick descriptions – to describe how qualitative data can complement big data by capturing the context that renders individual events and actions meaningful. She argues that:

... thick data analysis primarily relies on human brain power to process a small 'N' while big data analysis requires computational power ... to process a large 'N'. Big data reveals insights with a particular range of data points, while thick data reveals the social context of, and connections between, data points. Big data delivers numbers; thick data delivers stories (Wang, 2013).

Qual 4.0 – post-qualitative Research

I said at the beginning of this presentation that Pattie Lather identified moments in the development of qualitative research, and we got as far as 3.0: the acknowledgement of a constructivist ontology, but a slippage away from interpretivism as we were pulled in the direction of big datasets, metrics and evidence-based policy. In these closing minutes of my presentation, I want to draw attention to Lather's reflections on what she terms Qual 4.0 and add a few of my own about where qualitative research might be headed next.

For Lather, a postmodern feminist scholar, the future is once again postmodern as qualitative researchers grow tired of defending their art and work towards the production of different forms of knowledge in ways that are consistent with a decentred ontology. For Lather, this involves an explicit rejection of the scientific method in qualitative research and a new form of post qualitative inquiry; post-method. Elizabeth St Pierre argues that the task of 'post' critiques is to reject the structures and narratives, such as those of science, that fix, totalise and exclude, and 'to examine them so seriously that they deconstruct themselves, reveal their disciplinary goals and lose their innocence' (2012: 496-7).

What does post-qualitative inquiry look like? St Pierre describes it as follows:

I encourage ... [students] to try to forget humanist qualitative methodology and *begin with the epistemological and ontological commitments of the analysis* – e.g. Derrida's deconstruction, Foucault's power-knowledge reading and use it to think about whatever they're thinking about – dropouts, the Common Core Curriculum, reading. I advise them *not* to think about their studies using qualitative methodology and its grid of normalizing humanistic concepts, many of which are positivist: 'problem statement', 'research questions', 'research design', interview', 'observation', 'data', 'data collection', 'data analysis', 'grounded theory', 'representation', 'systemicity'. Instead, they might ask themselves, for example, how would Foucault study power relations in an educational apparatus in which the concept *dropout* is possible? What would he do to investigate that problem? (2014: 10 emphasis in italics).

The question this raises for me is this: how do we know we are doing science if we reject scientific indicators to measure the quality of our work? And what makes it research if we abandon the procedural logics of qualitative research, such as research questions, research design and data collection? How do we feel about letting go of the science of social science inquiry? And what distinguishes our research from literature or fiction if we drop the conventions of research from our work? Does it matter? Depending on how you answer these questions, there are three possible directions researchers might take in reference to this post-methodological approach to qualitative research.

The first is the deployment of methods that embrace subjectivity, reject linearity of research design and process, and emphasise lived experience. These include non-traditional techniques such as dance, poetry, drama and autoethnography that are rarely, if ever, found in qualitative textbooks, but which explicitly embrace the absence of science in the quest to convey the actor's point of view, including that of the researcher. During conference sessions here at ACSPRI yesterday, I learnt of new approaches to research, such as written portraiture and dramatic tableaux that have their origins within the arts rather than the social sciences. But the researchers also spoke of the fear and judgement they encountered among academic colleagues in response to the unconventionality of their methods; to a sense of isolation in being the only ones working with these methods; and to the absence of a textbook that clearly explicated the methods and analysis. 'Tell me what to *do*', one speaker had urged from her advisory team.

A second, rather more conventional, approach involves the adoption of a more political, activist

stance in research, emphasising ethical values of care, community and social justice (Brinkmann et al. 2014). This harks back to a more critical social science informed by Marx's question of why we should be satisfied with understanding the world instead of trying to change it. Critical social science is critical of interpretivism because it believes that understanding and explaining the world is not enough. Instead, it argues that we have an ethical obligation to speak out and act when we uncover unequal power structures and to emancipate marginalised groups from oppression (St Pierre, 2012). We are accountable for what we see and learn, and the values of the research are not shrouded from view but drive the research process. Alongside this is an ethical commitment to work collaboratively with those we study through forms of action research that avoid the appropriation of other's voices for the professional gain of the researcher and position research participants as co-investigators. 'Nothing about us without us' is the cry of those who have traditionally been objectified through our work and now wish to regain control over what is said about and done to them.

Finally for those who appreciate and understand the positivist dilemma in qualitative research, but still want to position themselves as social scientists – even if they hold a healthy cynicism towards science as a hegemonic project – there has to be something in our well-learned approaches that we can hold onto and not have dissolve under the postmodern gaze. This entails revisiting our practice collectively so that our work is conducted and judged by concepts and standards that come from our own paradigm and not someone else's. There have been plenty of attempts to do this. Perhaps the most fruitful I have encountered so far is that of Tracy (2010). She compares qualitative work to another artistic craft – that of cheese making – to illustrate the feasibility of adopting a universal hallmark of high quality without tying those criteria to specific processing techniques or flavours. In cheese-making, she says, there is near universal acceptance that indicators such as a pleasing texture, appearance, flavour and nutrition are signs of a good quality cheese, which allows cheesemakers in different traditions to 'learn from, admire, and dialogue with each other' (2010: 839). In the same vein, she says, so it is possible to formulate criteria for good quality qualitative research that is not explicitly tied to any epistemological position, never mind a scientific one. These criteria are:

1. The formulation of a worthy topic
2. Rich rigor – demonstrating rich descriptions and explanations that are simultaneously based on due diligence in methods, analysis and time in the field
3. Sincerity – honesty and transparency about the research process and the researcher's role in it.
4. Credibility: the trustworthiness, credibility and plausibility of the research findings and account
5. Resonance: the researcher's ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience
6. Significant contribution
7. Ethical research in both means and ends
8. Meaningful coherence – a consistency between theories and methods; aims and approach. A connectivity between the research elements

The problem we continue to face, however, is that there is a lack of agreement among qualitative researchers around the formulation of quality criteria. While this is reflective of a healthy diversity and debate within qualitative research, it also undermines our efforts to have universal standards that are accepted by those who sit outside our trade. How can we convince policymakers and funding agencies that our work is valid, important and rigorous when there is so much division in our work?

Conclusion

One of the things I appreciate most about qualitative research is the capacity and willingness of

researchers to scrutinise and reflect on their own assumptions and practices. This is not intended as an exercise of introspection or self-indulgence, but a desire to continually improve upon what we do and how we do it. Sometimes when we are caught up with teaching, grant writing, publishing and the myriad of other activities we do as researchers and academics, we fail to find the time for this reflexive practice. Certainly for me, preparing for this keynote has given me a rare period to stop and take note of where we have reached in qualitative research; the challenges we face and the opportunities ahead of us. Rather than focus purely on the exciting array of research methods that are now available to us, I have sought to emphasise the importance of methodological reflection. In doing so, I have identified the ongoing challenge that qualitative research has with *itself*, which we often frame in terms of, and in relation to its other – positivistic objectivist scientific research. I hope that some of what I have said today resonates with you, or at least encourages you to reflect upon your own practice and assumptions so that we can continue to progress as a community in terms of our scholarly practice, our relevance and our skills and knowledge.

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