

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND THE LEGITIMIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Brent Atkinson Anthony Heath
Northern Illinois University
Ronald Chenail
Nova University

Reservations about qualitative research often center around contentions that, since qualitative methods are so subjective and uncontrolled, the results of qualitative research are not valid and reliable. While many qualitative researchers in education have attempted to improve the trustworthiness of their results by making their methods more systematic, we argue that qualitative researchers cannot establish the trustworthiness of their findings, regardless of the methods they use. Rather, the legitimization of knowledge requires the judgment of an entire community of stakeholders. In the absence of certainty, knowledge is an ethical matter, one in which the judgement of each stakeholder must count.

In their paper, "Family Therapy and Qualitative Research," Moon, Dillon, and Sprenkle (1990) have provided an overview of the essential characteristics of qualitative research as it has developed in the field of education. They have suggested that family therapy researchers can benefit from incorporating methods used by qualitative researchers into marriage and family therapy research.

For several years we have followed the development of qualitative methods among educational researchers with interest, and we agree that family therapy researchers can benefit much from dialogue with their colleagues in education. However, we have some concerns about importing qualitative research methods from education to family therapy. A summary of our concerns follows.

Like many individuals in the field of family therapy, we have come to question some of the conventional tenets of science and society regarding the nature of knowledge. The conventional scientific paradigm assumes that a real social world exists independently of our observing of it and that this independently existing world is singular, stable, and predictable. It further assumes that if we apply the proper methods, we can have increasingly accurate views of what really happens in the world.

We think that the idea of "real" events happening independently of our descriptions is a useful one. We assume that individual observers come into contact with a world that exists "outside their skin," and we assume that some ideas about the world can be more accurate than others. However, we do not assume that "what is out there" is necessarily singular, stable, or predictable as it has been assumed in traditional social

Brent J. Atkinson, PhD, is Assistant Professor, Specialization in Marriage and Family Therapy, Department of Human and Family Resources, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115.

Anthony W. Heath, PhD, is Associate Professor, Specialization in Marriage and Family Therapy, Department of Human and Family Resources, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115.

Ronald J. Chenail, PhD, is Assistant Professor and Director, Institute for Systemic Therapy, School of Social Sciences, Nova University, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314.

science. Some aspects of it might be, but we do not *assume* it to be. Instead, we assume that at any point in time there may be many equally accurate ways to describe events in the social world. Further, we assume that an act of observation may change the observed phenomenon. Most importantly, we do not believe that it is possible for any observer (or group of observers) to have *privileged* access to "what really happens" in the social world by uniformly applying a specific method of observation.

Some qualitative researchers in education have also questioned many conventional scientific assumptions about the nature of knowledge. A survey of the field of qualitative inquiry reveals, however, that some assumptions have not changed. Like conventional researchers, most qualitative researchers in education maintain that the use of specific, systematic methods of data collecting and recording make the insights of qualitative researchers more valid or trustworthy than the insights of those inquirers who may be less systematic or more methodologically diverse. Because of the methods they use, qualitative researchers believe that they are in a better position to evaluate the legitimacy of various explanations of the social world. Even qualitative inquirers who claim to be "constructivist" maintain that they can increase the "truth value" of their observations through the application of specific methods, such as triangulation, external auditing, and others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

We believe that these assumptions among qualitative researchers are still rooted in positivist conceptions about the nature of knowledge. While we agree that the insights generated through qualitative research need to be scrutinized and evaluated, we believe that the trustworthiness of hypotheses, insights, or explanations cannot be established by individual researchers, regardless of the methods they use (Atkinson, Heath, & Chenail, 1990). Rather, the legitimization of knowledge requires the judgment of an entire *community* of observers and is most appropriately a democratic process in which all stakeholders have equal input (Atkinson, 1990; Atkinson & Heath, 1987, 1989; Atkinson, Heath, & Chenail, 1990; Bernstein, 1983; Rorty, 1982, 1985, 1987).

Walters (1990) has argued convincingly that there is simply no compelling evidence to support the idea that the quality of an insight is related to the process by which the insight was generated. Good ideas should be evaluated in terms of their elegance, effectiveness, and coherency, not in terms of the nature of the process by which they are generated. As Walters (1990) puts it, "There is no predictable blueprint that regulates the pattern of discovery" (p. 461). The quality of ideas generated in qualitative research may have more to do with the imaginative and intuitive abilities of the researcher than the specific method the researcher was using when the idea came to him/her. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that the insights of a bright, imaginative researcher who followed no discernable systematic procedures for observation and note-taking could be of consistently higher quality, as evaluated by a community of stakeholders, than the insights of a task-oriented researcher who carefully followed the systematic methods of data gathering and recording prescribed by recent qualitative research textbooks (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Kirk & Miller, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

We believe that social scientists would do well to abandon the assumption that it is the researcher's job to establish legitimacy of qualitative research findings (Atkinson & Heath, 1987, 1989). There is nothing that exempts researchers from the social obligation to be reasonable in their claims, present the best possible evidence to support their insights, be responsive to challenges, and be open and honest with others (Smith, 1990a), but to conclude that the use of systematic methods somehow makes their findings more trustworthy is, in our view, questionable. We believe that methods can be useful in helping individual researchers become more confident of their findings. However, methods of inquiry cannot do *more* than this, and it is questionable to say that consumers of research should regard the insights of researchers who apply systematic methods as more trustworthy than the insights of others who may not have used these methods.

Establishing the trustworthiness of the insights generated through exploratory research is the job of those who are consumers of the research, not the job of social science researchers. Researchers should be given the freedom to immerse themselves in unique experiences, follow their instincts and hunches, allow insights to arise, and then illustrate these insights vividly enough so that their colleagues and community members can understand them, try them out, and evaluate them for themselves. Individual community members can then check researchers' insights and explanations against what they perceive as "reality" using common sense. Assuming a variety of explanations will seem sensible; other criteria can be applied, for example, ethical criteria (values implied by the researcher's explanations, moral implications of the researcher's way of making sense of the social world) or pragmatic criteria (how well the explanation appears to facilitate solutions to problems).

In the course of dialogue between consumers who are each evaluating the researcher's ideas, some ideas will emerge as receiving more broad support than others. Dialogue and consensus is the only process through which some ideas can be said to be more legitimate than others in any scientific sense. In Rorty's (1987) words, "The best way to find out what to believe is to listen to as many suggestions and arguments as you can" (p. 46). Communal legitimization is characterized by a mixture of unforced agreement and tolerant disagreement in the course of a free and open encounter between people who hold different beliefs (Rorty, 1987). The resolutions reached will always be more or less temporary, subject to reconsideration, rarely unanimous, and often as much contested as shared.

In short, we believe that it is not appropriate for family therapists to delegate to researchers the job of establishing the trustworthiness of research findings for them. The responsibility must be shared. In the absence of certainty, knowledge is an ethical matter, one in which the judgment of each stakeholder must count. Once researchers are relieved of the impossible job of establishing the credibility or trustworthiness of their findings, the goals and assumptions of the qualitative research enterprise might change considerably. The goal of research might be simply to create novel observational experiences from which new views about the social world can emerge. Research could be thought of primarily as a process that facilitates conditions ripe for a flash of insight.

Actually, we believe that the process of exploration and communal legitimization that we are describing has characterized family therapy research from the very beginning. As Moon, Dillon, and Sprenkle (1990) have pointed out, most of the major insights and theoretical models used in the field of family therapy have been generated through informal, exploratory, qualitative research. Early pioneers such as Bateson, Haley, Minuchin, Bowen, Watzlawick, and others engaged in close-up interviewing and observation of families, generating insights as they went. Their methods were rarely systematic and largely undocumented, but few could deny that these insights have mightily influenced the field of family therapy. Although considerable effort has been devoted to attempts to test empirically and validate these insights, we believe it is safe to say that the legitimization has taken place primarily as practitioners have taken the insights and "tested" them out on their own. Over the course of time, some theories and models have received a broader base of support than others.

Up to this point, the field has been largely apologetic for its lack of empirical validation. It seems to us, however, that the epistemological inclinations of many family therapists have led them toward a preference for a different kind of validation process—one that requires the judgment and affirmation of the community of practicing family therapists. We believe that the field of family therapy has a rich heritage of qualitative research and a unique process for the evaluation of ideas. We suggest that clinicians and researchers could join together to celebrate our qualitative heritage with pride. Rather than regretting that our methods for knowledge legitimization are unlike those

of other older, more established disciplines, we could embrace our uniqueness and openly endorse the kind of communal legitimization process that has made our discipline strong.

In our view, qualitative researchers in education have been restricted by their preoccupation with finding ways to represent their research as legitimate in the eyes of conventional researchers. Since validity and reliability are the ultimate goals of conventional inquiry, qualitative researchers have devoted much time to trying to develop methods that can allow them to assert "you can trust my findings" in the same sense that conventional researchers do. However, we are in a period of scientific history in which conventional social science researchers are finding it increasingly more difficult to convince each other that their results can be trusted. In recent decades, philosophers of science (Bernstein, 1983; Rorty, 1982, 1985, 1987), sociologists of science (Jagtenberg, 1983; Knorr-Cetina, 1981), historians of science (Kuhn, 1962, 1977), natural scientists (Hayward, 1984; Maturana & Varela, 1987), critical theorists (Habermas, 1971; Popkewitz, 1984), and social scientists (Gergen, 1982; Smith, 1989) have all argued that, contrary to what scientists have believed for decades, there is no general methodology (including experimental designs) that can lead to the kind of certainty that we once had hoped the positivist/empiricist approach to science would give us. They have argued that each angle or method of observation has its own bias and limitations, values cannot be separated from facts, the scientific enterprise has its own elitist agendas, and the methodology of conventional science, which involves reductionism and separation of subject and object, has led to harmful unintended societal consequences.

If conventional researchers in the social sciences have failed to convince us that their results can be trusted, it is even more unlikely that qualitative researchers will be convincing. Actually, there are recent signs that some qualitative researchers in education are questioning the feasibility and appropriateness of methodological validation and moving toward a collaborative evaluation process very much like that which has characterized inquiry in family therapy for decades (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990; Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Smith, 1990b).

CONCLUSION

We recognize that many thoughtful individuals in our field do not share the assumptions about the nature of knowledge that we prefer. At present, our field appears to be divided among those who prefer the conventional epistemology, those who reject the conventional epistemology, and those who are somewhere in between. It seems to us that the research tradition that Moon, Dillon, and Sprenkle (1990) have brought to our attention will be particularly appealing to those who are somewhere between accepting and rejecting the conventional epistemology. Conventional researchers will likely find qualitative methods too subjective and uncontrolled to yield valid findings. Those who reject the conventional research epistemology may agree with our contention that the legitimacy of research findings cannot be determined by researchers, but rather by a communal judgment process. We do believe, however, that our field is characterized by a great number of individuals who see merit in both the conventional and "new" epistemology. For these individuals the qualitative tradition in education has a great deal to offer.

Finally, we want to be clear that our reservations about qualitative research in education concern primarily the attempts that qualitative researchers have made to find methods that establish the credibility of their findings. While many of the formal methods used by qualitative educational researchers are related to this goal, not all of the methods are. Each of us has benefited tremendously from the practical suggestions we have received from our educational colleagues regarding, for example, ways to

facilitate contexts ripe for flashes of insight, procedures for writing field notes, ways to use the research context to help respondents change the oppressive situations in which they struggle, and so on. Many of the suggestions we have received from educational researchers are now part of our regular research practices. We are hopeful that the paper by Moon, Dillon, and Sprenkle (1990) will indeed inspire dialogue and exchange between qualitative researchers in education and marriage and family therapy.

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