

treatment of some of these tensions. The criteria she offers are welcome starting points for identifying what might be the framework for quality in social internet research, particularly for researchers new to this form of inquiry.

I've been studying the theories and practices of qualitative research methods for more than 15 years now, first within the social sciences and, shortly thereafter, diving into interpretive, feminist, and postmodern schools of thought. A certain part of me enjoys the idea of putting together a puzzle or solving a mystery so that I can see the whole. Another, stronger part of me enjoys the disjuncture, the seams and gaps and points of connections between elements or ideas. A disruptive deconstruction allows me to see new patterns of meaning not otherwise identifiable at the placid surface of everyday taken-for-granted experience.

Nancy and I come from similar educational backgrounds, but the way we experience qualitative inquiry and think about method differs in both subtle and sharp ways. As I composed this final response of our book, I tried multiple variations on a theme: finessing Nancy's arguments, arguing about the details of dialogical and dialectical theories, making a few erudite (I hoped!) comments about quality in methods, taking the discussion to the level of epistemology and ontology, and even writing an illustrative narrative. As I listened to the voices in my head, I heard not just a dialogue but a cacophony. I found myself writing in circles.

I finally realized that, although I wanted to embrace the notion of dialectics, this image did not satisfactorily capture the complexity of qualitative inquiry as I have experienced it. I find the concept useful, yet its historical roots don't sit well with me. Early conceptions of the dialectical process hold that it will eventually yield a middle ground that is Truth. In later conceptions, the dialectical process yields a third alternative, drawing on and also stronger than both elements. The fragmented postmodernist in me resists the dualism. A dualism is certainly not what Nancy intended, but I can't stop thinking about the limits of a two- or three-sided image. Also, as I reflect on my own research, almost every moment during the course of a study illustrates yet another dialectical tension that cannot be managed or balanced. Rather than bore you and me with an elaborate explanation of the long stretches of paralysis that result during any given project because of these irresolvable tensions, I realized I needed to figure out what image of quality and qualitative inquiry made better sense in my world.

Response to Nancy Baym

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A trap in qualitative internet inquiry (or qualitative inquiry of any sort, not just internet related) is to believe that qualitative methods bestow a natural interpretive clarity and self-reflexive awareness on the researcher. As Nancy Baym aptly points out, the myriad approaches falling into this broad category, most of which are flexible and adaptive, can lead researchers to believe that "anything goes." This oversimplification is exacerbated when researchers new to this form of inquiry read publications in which the author buries the literature review, application of procedures, analytical processes, and theoretical development within the story and between the lines. The interpretation can seem to flow effortlessly from the writer, and the unique case can seem unlinked from any other phenomenon or case.

Add to this the fact that even among methodologists "qualitative inquiry" means very different things. Are we talking about the methods of collecting information? The application of procedures? The rigor of interpretation? The worldview of the researcher? Qualitative inquiry continues to discover and embrace its diversity, encompassing a multiplicity of worldviews, procedures, and approaches. Within this broad research context, it is difficult to know where a particular author is coming from in the research unless he or she spells out in great detail the procedures he or she followed, the inclusion of which can clash with current modes of writing and the ability to present research in flowing narrative forms. Nancy Baym's discussion of a dialectical approach to finding quality in qualitative internet research offers a useful

❖ CRYSTALS VERSUS TRIANGLES

On further reflection, it occurred to me that the very interplay and juxtaposition of dialectical tensions in my own research seem to yield the most interesting possibilities, particularly within the criteria for quality Nancy discusses in the second part of her essay. So while I might begin a sentence agreeing with Nancy that the phenomenological problem is irresolvable and, therefore, we should get on to the more practical issue of determining what might make a study more or less compelling, in the same breath, I find I disagree—because struggling with this problem is part of what yields reflexive research, a key to generating research that is perceived as trustworthy and compelling.

The image of a prism mentioned by Lori Kendall in Chapter 1 resonates strongly. Laurel Richardson (1994, 1997; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) proposes that the central image for qualitative inquiry should be the crystal. Her metaphor is worth quoting at length here:

The central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry with an infinite variety of shapers, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, and are altered, but they are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose—not triangulation, crystallization.

In a crystal, light can be both waves and particles. Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of validity (we feel how there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves); and crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. (Richardson, 1997, p. 92)

This image is compelling because it values both interior and exterior aspects of the research process, giving credence to the fact that all research is situated and personal—a thoroughly human endeavor. Yet order and rigor are necessary to preserve the integrity of the outcome.

❖ CRITERIA VERSUS STANDARDS

To shift to a slightly different point, no matter what metaphors or principles we apply to our own research, in the academic world of knowledge production, “quality” is a state granted and recognized from the outside. One’s work is assessed in context by various audiences, who

have their own sets of standards and context-specific criteria for evaluation. Frankly, my own beliefs about what makes quality in social research vary widely, depending on the context within which I am making a judgment. Let’s problematize this more closely.

Who is doing the research? If I am teaching new researchers, I am patient but highly skeptical of their work, insisting on in-depth explanations and justifications of approach. On the other hand, if I know a researcher has previously conducted what is commonly perceived to be high-quality research, a certain level of credibility is built into my reading of all that person’s work. I more readily accept experimental or narrative work from someone who has proven herself previously.

Where was the research published? If someone writes about a cultural practice in a piece labeled “fiction” and I find meaning in this work, I feel grateful that I gained added benefit from what might otherwise be “merely” a story [scare quotes to denote I understand the irony]. Sure, I might question the methods, but since he published something as fiction, I don’t quibble with the details. On the other hand, if someone writes a good story and labels it “research,” I am much more likely to question those methods and expect some explanation of how and on what empirical evidence that researcher derived her conclusions.

What is the goal of the research? This book takes a fairly narrow stance on the goal of research and therefore offers definitions and perspectives that align with this goal. Producing research findings for publication in academically acceptable venues for the purpose of contributing to a body of knowledge is not a universal or all-encompassing end. Research intended to build community, promote social justice, disrupt dominant patterns of power, or dismantle tidy categories of meaning requires quite different criteria for evaluation.

The three previous paragraphs may seem to paint a picture of qualitative inquiry as a perilous house of cards, where the criteria always change and determinations of quality are essentially fickle. However, I want to focus attention on the idea that criteria and standards are intertwined concepts, but they are not synonymous: A criterion specifies an attribute or behavior, which then serves as a measure for judgment. A standard can be thought of as a set of criteria or a principle on which assessments rely.

While one’s criteria may change for various reasons, one’s standards need not. The former necessarily morph with each specific piece of research, because each research project is a unique, situated, authored cultural product, whereas the latter can and most often do remain firmly embedded in one’s ontological and axiological frameworks for

understanding what it means to do "good" research within the vast umbrella we call "qualitative inquiry."

I draw attention to this distinction because it helps clarify the idea that qualitative inquiry can be wide open for the creative invention and mixing of methodological approaches, and yet, at the same time, particular criteria must inform one's work: As Nancy emphasizes, a systematic focus and consistency will build symmetry within the crystal that—even if not apparent to the reader—will have high resonance, thus marking the project as one that is credible and trustworthy.

This is why the crystalline image works well as a way of thinking about quality: Order and rigor exist in a form that exhibits multiple refracting surfaces, appears differently depending on how you look at it or what type of light is targeted at it, and reveals both processes and products (in a crystal we can see both waves and particles). The criteria Nancy describes provide a beginning point for thinking about how one might introduce order and rigor as and within crystalline forms, but are not an ending, because within this metaphor, multiplicities can emerge.

❖ IMPROVISATION AND A FULL TOOLBOX

Given the most likely audience reading this book, I think most would agree with the notion that "the more you know, the better off you are." If you want to create research reports that are respected by academics (and I'm not suggesting this as the sole or most admirable goal of research by any means; I'm just acknowledging that it is probably the most common objective held by readers of this book), you should be well trained in a range of approaches—not only so that you make good choices from the beginning but so that you also know how to explain your decisions later. Mastery of multiple methods allows one to move with ease in multiple directions. Improvisation is easier if one has a broad range of skills to begin with, because it requires the ability to be fully present and aware and to draw on any number of options in the moment as we interact with the context of study.

Of course, as we grow more aware of the multiple perspectives that inform qualitative inquiry, the choices can become daunting. Every year, I realize how much more I don't know. As I study epistemological and axiological discussions within different cultures, my methodological choices only become more bewildering. On the one hand, we want more tools and techniques to draw on, so that we don't fall prey to the axiom, "When the only tool one has is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." On the other hand, when our toolbox includes an

ever-growing mix of interpretive, critical, queer, feminist, postmodernist, postcolonialist tools, nothing looks like the comfortable familiarity of a nail. The project of hammering a nail shifts to something else entirely, which can open up possibilities for political and resistive acts that cannot be ignored in the search for clarity, balance, or parsimony.

Here, I'm not so much talking about method as "application of procedure," whereby we might ask the question of whether it is better (loaded term intended) or not to use interviews or surveys to collect information. I am focused more on the issue of "interpretive rigor," a more recent discussion addressing the methods associated with framing questions, analyzing texts, and interpreting/representing Other in the process of writing and editing findings.

If we take a postmodern stance on knowledge production, we might reject such concepts as theory-building, agreeing with Tyler (1986) that the purpose of ethnography is evocation through aesthetics. If we take to heart a feminist critique of the processes of knowledge production, the search for method might become one that "interrogate[s] what the theoretical move that establishes foundations *authorizes*, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses" (Butler, 1995, p. 39, emphasis in original). With these perspectives on inquiry, the list of criteria offered by Nancy may not suffice. We might need to raise additional questions: How well do reflexivity, irony, bricolage, intertextuality, pastiche, and hyperreality fit into the master narratives that still discipline our procedural decisions during the research project? And if not at the level of dictating the precise method that ought to be used, how can we find a broader range of options within which we are authorized to call our inquiry legitimate or publishable?

Continuing, if we embrace these contemporary lenses, the goal of meeting some authority's criteria becomes increasingly difficult. Nancy's list is extremely practical—a useful and fruitful starting point. But if that list doesn't resonate with you or you seek to interrogate and dismantle those ideas, what models or concepts associated with methodological rigor would be more useful? What standards apply to your own work, if not these?

❖ ACCOUNTABILITY

There are innumerable possible sets of criteria, each with its particular set of delimiters. I find the ethic of accountability a compelling way to address quality because it identifies a standard and specifies underlying criteria that can guide ethical rigor. What does accountability *mean*?

As Maria Christina Gonzalez articulates beautifully in a brief essay on the ethics of a postcolonial ethnography (2003), the term "accountability" has lost its strength as an ethical guide because in the academy, it is "so familiar as to almost be cliché in our intellectual parlance" (p. 78). If we look more closely at what accountability means, we can rediscover its strength as a guide:

From a colonialist perspective, when we think of the concept of accountability, we are concerned with the possible repercussions for not having followed "the rules" as set forth by the imperial force. Let go of this meaning. Instead, look at the word. Account-ability. The ability to account. To tell a story. (Gonzalez, 2003, p. 82)

Importantly, the ethic of accountability,¹ continues Gonzalez, "is not just the telling of the ethnographic tale. It is the telling of our story, of how we came to know the ethnographic tale. There is no natural boundary between a story and our learning of it" (p. 82). This goes beyond simple explanation, because it is an accounting of choices among various alternatives, as well as a story of missteps, shortcuts, shifts, revelations, and battles. It is only possible if we are able to articulate the beliefs underlying each choice. Since choice necessarily involves competing options, the accountability part comes into play when we are able to explain why we chose this method instead of another equally acceptable method. We can only engage in this level of reflexive analysis of our methodology when we know a lot about methods and where they come from, epistemologically and ontologically speaking. Whether or not accountability is fully expressed in every research report, it is a quality that can be called on at any point, when we should then be able to tell the story of the story. As Gonzalez notes, "It's not so easy" (p. 84).

Nancy and I steadfastly agree that questions of quality must be addressed, but that at some level, one should note a distinctive difference between the methodological level of reflexivity and the rhetorical challenge of making arguments. It is important to be able to explain oneself or preempt some of the audience's questions, but this type of improvisation requires a solid knowledge of the possible choices, a keen awareness of the criteria applied to one's own work, and a reflexive analysis of what criteria might be used by others to assess the quality of our work. Paradoxically, perhaps, I believe this process is less about finding the answers than asking good questions.

❖ RECOMMENDED READING

All three editions of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000, 2005) are a valuable resource for understanding the complexities of qualitative inquiry.

For an exhaustive and interesting discussion of paradigmatic controversies and debates over legitimacy, I recommend Guba and Lincoln's chapter, "Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences," in the third edition of that handbook (2005).

For a dense elaboration of the history of qualitative inquiry as well as an outline of the major issues being currently debated in this arena, it is worth reading carefully the introduction to the third edition by Denzin and Lincoln, "Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research" (2005). For a contrasting perspective that more aligns with Nancy's perspective, I recommend Silverman's edited volume *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method, and Practice* (2004).

❖ NOTE

1. The other three ethics discussed by Gonzalez include (2) context, an open-eyed mindfulness; (3) truthfulness, which, more than a "simple consciously expressed truth . . . [is] an opening of the heart, a willingness to be absolutely existentially naked . . . ; and (4) community, a radical transformation of the separated, disengaged 'audience,' 'the field,' 'our readers,' and 'our colleagues'" (2003, p. 84). As I've oversimplified her argument in this footnote, I recommend reading her essay in its entirety.