

Pursuing Excellence in Qualitative Inquiry

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Psychological science is now in a period of major transition. After almost a century of dominance by a foundational view of empirical science, a new pluralism is sweeping the field. We witness the rapid and global expansion of perspectives, visions, and goals of inquiry. Partly owing to the traditional distinction between quantitative and qualitative research, these pluralistic pursuits are typically gathered under the qualitative umbrella. As I will first propose, the criteria of excellence applicable to traditional empirical research are mistakenly applied to most forms of qualitative inquiry. Furthermore, because of their differing ontologies, epistemologies, and aims of inquiry, there are no adequate criteria of excellence applicable across the qualitative spectrum. Thus explored is the emergence and sustainability of criteria within communities of practice. Within such communities, criteria of excellence become evident. At the same time, when criteria are solidified, their rigorous application is inimical to the well-being of the field and its contributions to society. Discussions of excellence ultimately may profit from an orientation of reflective pragmatism.

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The field of psychology has slowly begun to participate in a momentous movement occurring within the social sciences more generally. Of special significance, we find a deterioration in scientific foundationalism, an increased presence of ethnic and minority voices in the social sciences, and an inability of traditional experimental methods to speak to pressing issues of society. As a result, interest in nontraditional forms of inquiry has burgeoned. Owing to the traditional distinction between quantitative and qualitative research, such explorations are typically—though misleadingly—gathered under the rubric of qualitative research. Only one indicator of the emerging sea-change is the phenomenal success of Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) pivotal volume, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, first published in 1994. So active and innovative is the field, that by 2011 this work had gone through four new editions. Additional handbooks on practices of action research, feminist research, narrative inquiry, field research, interviewing, and mixed

methods have burgeoned, along with a spate of new journals (*Qualitative Psychology*, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *the Qualitative Report*, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*). On the Internet, there are now over 12 million websites containing the phrase “narrative method” alone. In the British Psychological Society, the Section on Qualitative Methods in Psychology was instituted in 2005. At present, it is the largest sections in the BPS.

Among the significant issues raised by this expanding movement is the challenge of evaluating the emerging forms of research. With the traditional animus toward qualitative inquiry in scientific psychology, there is little in the way of accumulated experience in carrying out and judging qualitative work. How can newcomers to such inquiry proceed if they cannot ascertain what counts as “good work?” And how can journal editors and reviewers conduct responsible evaluations if the criteria for excellence are obscure? As well, the range and variation in practices of inquiry steadily expands. Thus, even for seasoned qualitative researchers, the route to excellence is seldom clear. For example, the practice of autoethnography was introduced into the social sciences less than 20 years ago. Yet, since its inception, scholars have now

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added duo-autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography, and performative autoethnography to the resources for inquiry. With this upheaval in research practices, how can the experienced researcher—to say nothing of the aspiring researcher or responsible gatekeeper—know how to proceed? By what criteria should policymakers or the public judge such research?

Debate on criteria of excellence in qualitative research are longstanding, and with the recent flourishing of new practices, there is intense dialogue across the social sciences (cf. [Devers, 1999](#); [Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999](#); [Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002](#); [Gergen, & Gergen, 2000](#); [Guba & Lincoln, 1994](#); [Horsburgh, 2003](#); [Lietz & Zayas, 2010](#); [Maxwell, 2011](#); [Morse, 2003](#); [Reicher, 2000](#); [Jeanfreau & Jack, 2010](#)). Clearly, there are no fixed answers to questions of evaluation, and ongoing dialogue is essential. However, in what follows I will introduce a number of considerations that may serve for psychologists, in particular, as useful entries into this dialogue. First, it will be useful to consider the traditional notions of research methods in psychology and the problematic application of these ideas to the span of emerging qualitative practices. From the pluralist mix of contemporary orientations to inquiry, I will then consider five approaches that offer illuminating contrasts, both with each other and with traditional empiricist methods. This discussion will set the stage for a discussion of evaluation within communities of practice, along with their potentials and limitations.

From Methodology to Practices of Inquiry

Within the field of psychology, the concept of “research methods” is tied to a positivist/empiricist vision of scientific truth. From this standpoint, the objective tracing of cause and effect relations among variables requires systematic and repeatable practices of research. Experimental methods offer the most sophisticated means of achieving the scientific goals of prediction and control. A premium is thus placed on valid and nuanced measurement, reliability of observations, and statistical inference (see [Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2009](#)). Putting aside the question of “empirical truth,” most psychologists would agree that empirically supported accounts of the world can have pragmatic utility. There are cer-

tainly many circumstances in which behavioral predictions may be useful. Predictions of voting, accident rates, employee turnover, domestic violence, community mental health needs, and educational outcomes are illustrative.

Yet, not all forms of psychological inquiry share the goal of prediction and control. It is precisely this presumption to which the great bulk of qualitative inquiry forms a challenge. There are, to be sure, many qualitative researchers who work within the empiricist tradition. Their aim, in this case, is not generally to verify a hypothesis, but to supply insights from which more testable propositions might emerge, or to enrich and expand upon bare-bones statistical reports. The domain of mixed-methods research is illustrative. However, for a vast number in the qualitative community the goals of inquiry differ substantially from those of the traditional empiricist. These researchers may variously be concerned with understanding others’ experiences, reducing societal alienation, directly effecting social change, exposing conditions of oppression, and more. In a [Kuhnian \(1962\)](#) sense, the differing paradigms of research are incommensurable. In such contexts, empiricist criteria of research excellence are either tangential or inapplicable.

It is in this latter context that many qualitative researchers find the concept of *research methods* alien. At the outset, the longstanding association of the concept with the positivist/empiricist program is problematic. Many qualitative researchers see their goals as differing from this program. Others reject the term *method* because of its restrictive power, suggesting as it does a counterproductive disciplining of inquiry. To cite but one example, by traditional standards the questions asked in a research interview should be standardized across all respondents, and responses submitted to coding categories. In contrast, as [Ruthellen Josselson \(2013\)](#) proposes, the interview is a complex relational process and can unfold in ways that either invite or suppress the respondent’s offerings. With the interviewer’s keen sensitivity to the relationship and a continuing flexibility, respondents may supply far richer and more illuminating views than can ever be obtained through standardization. Further, for qualitative researchers concerned with the complexities and nuances of human meaning, controlled measurement is both obstructive and

misleading in its outcomes. Required is a dynamic process of interpretation, one that remains open, flexible, and empathic. Iconic is Gadamer's (1975/2004) volume, *Truth and Method*, a classic critique of systematizing and standardizing practices of interpreting texts. For many in the qualitative movement there is reason for replacing "methods of research" with "practices of inquiry."

Multiple Worlds of Inquiry

If there is one important hallmark of the qualitative movement in the social sciences it is the enormous range of available practices. As Wertz (2011) describes, pluralism is the prominent characteristic of the qualitative community in psychology. In effect, the qualitative movement harbors not one, but multiple alternatives to the empiricist concern with prediction and control. Most important for the present arguments, these diverse aims are couched in quite disparate epistemological, ontological, and ideological assumptions. In what follows, I briefly contrast five different orientations to the aims of inquiry, and the range of assumptions and values in which they are lodged. This will set the stage for asking more explicitly about criteria of excellence.

Phenomenology

While phenomenology was once a major fixture in psychological study, the advent of behaviorism in the 1930s reduced its adherents to a small but dedicated number. Because science should be concerned with observables, behaviorist/empiricists reasoned, phenomenology's subject matter—human experience—was not scientific. Yet, with the later success of the cognitive revolution, psychology largely renegeed on its demands for an observable subject matter. The door again opened to phenomenology. While sharing with cognitive psychology a concern with internal processes, the phenomenologist's ontology is substantially different. For phenomenologists, concrete experience of the world is a reality that demands attention; for cognitive psychologists the ontological givens are the cognitive processes that supposedly give rise to conscious experience. Experience itself is a derivative or epiphenomenon. At the same time, the cognitivist holds that internal process

can be objectively measured through standardized instruments, while phenomenologists believe that understanding another's experiences necessitates a sophisticated and unfolding process of interpretation. Both orientations are committed to value neutrality in their practices of inquiry, but with a strong contrast in the implicit ethics. While cognitive researchers set out to verify abstract hypotheses—functioning then at a distance from their subjects of study—phenomenologists are concerned with understanding others' experiences in their own terms—thus drawing themselves closer to their subjects. It is partly for the latter reason that phenomenologists play a central role in the humanist movement. In terms of their goals, phenomenologists resist the common pursuit of prediction and control, in hopes of establishing genuine understanding between people. In effect, the ontologies, epistemologies, values, and goals of these traditions are quite separate.

Discourse Analysis

The study of discourse has expanded dramatically in recent years (see, e.g., Schiffrin, Tanen, & Hamilton, 2001; Johnstone, 2007; Gee, 2012), and important distinctions have emerged among its many forms. Important distinctions can be made, for example, among traditional discourse analysis (focused on specific samples of spoken or written discourse), critical discourse analysis (with its expanded concern with ideology and cultural context), and conversation analysis (with its focus on interdependent patterns of language use in conversations). Common to all these orientations, however, is an ontology that differs dramatically from both phenomenology and cognitive psychology. Whereas these orientations are typically viewed as dualist—with a firm distinction between inner process and outward behavior—the discourse analysis community generally avoids or is opposed to dualism. What lies "beneath" discourse—whether meaning or cognitive process—is irrelevant or misleading. Discourse analysis is largely a child of the poststructural movement in the humanities and science, and most of its practitioners have resultantly abandoned concern with the longstanding search for those "inner" structures or processes that supposedly give rise to behavior. As the discourse analyst might say, "Here we have people's spo-

ken or written utterances; why should we presume they are the outcome of some form of “inner utterance” (e.g., private meaning, cognitive process)? Let us focus on the way the language itself functions in human action.”

Yet, even with the abandonment of dualism, discourse analysts tend to split between two orientations, the first of which carries with it certain empiricist vestiges, and the latter of which can be viewed as postmodern. In the former case, the attempt is to “get it right” with respect to the outcomes of analysis. Thus, for example, many are concerned with reliable categorization, sampling, and statistics. More interestingly, the postmodernists understand that discourse is a major means for constructing worlds of intelligibility. Indeed, this is the very reason for studying discourse processes. However, they also understand that their analyses are also discursive—shared ways of making sense of others’ discourse. In this case there is no “getting it right.” The analysis is itself a construction.

The critical discourse movement provides the most striking contrast with traditionalist empiricists, inasmuch as many of its adherents not only tend to be postmodern in temperament, but generally eschew value neutrality in their analysis. Their aims are passionate, as they attempt to illuminate forms of public discourse they view as prejudicial, oppressive, unjust, or misleading. The general attempt of such inquiry is not to establish what is ultimately true, either about cognition, meaning, or discourse itself. Rather, the chief hope is to liberate the society from problematic forms of speaking and writing, and thus to bring about social change (see [Watkins & Shulman, 2010](#)). For example, in [Willig’s \(1999\)](#) edited volume, *Applied Discourse Analysis*, we find critical analyses of the taken-for-granted assumptions in self-help literature, reproductive technologies, psychiatric medication, and sex education. All of these accounts question the nature of these fields of practice, but not one relies on formalized data analysis.

Narrative Study

There are many who view narrative study as a form of discourse analysis; others employ narrative analysis to illuminate the narrative character of personal meaning; and still others

view narratives as expressions of cultural life. These are only a few of the major ways in which an enormous array of scholars across the disciplines approach narrative inquiry (see, e.g., [Clandinin, 2007](#); [Riessman, 2007](#); [Daiute, 2014](#)). Each approach is also accompanied by a particular epistemology, relies on its own forms and treatments of evidence, and attaches specific values to the outcomes of study.

For purposes of contrast with the preceding, I will focus here only on the use of narrative for the illumination of cultural life. More specifically, narrative inquiry in this case brings into public visibility the lives of the marginalized and oppressed, and the otherwise invisible conditions in which they live. Such work enables the reader to understand their lives “from the inside,” reveals their problems and plights, and may indirectly encourage advocacy. This form of narrative study shares with phenomenology the goal of illuminating personal experience, but it does not attempt to bracket researcher assumptions or values. Narrative researchers in this case begin with the assumption that experience is largely structured by narratives, and ideology provides the motivational basis for such work. Unlike discourse analysts, narrative researchers in this case view discourse as important only as it can reveal the experience of the individual. For example, [Upegui-Hernandez \(2012\)](#) uses interview data from Dominican and Colombian young adult children of immigrants, to explore the problems of living with multiple cultural identities. [Hammack and Cohler \(2009\)](#) contrast the challenges through recent history faced by men in realizing a gay identity. [Halbertal and Koren \(2006\)](#) provide insights into issues of identity among gay Orthodox Jews. Such work effectively functions to reduce the distance from otherwise insulated or alienated groups and to illuminate the individual and sociocultural processes by which identity is constructed.

Autoethnography

Ethnographic research—with its aim of illuminating the cultural life of a given group of people—has long been a fixture in the social sciences. And, as psychologists have joined together with anthropologists to create a field of psychological anthropology, such research is increasingly making its way into the field of

psychology. However, with the more recent emergence of autoethnography, the landscape changes significantly. In autoethnographic inquiry, insights into the culture of interest are provided by the first-hand experiences of a cultural participant. Thus, for example, autoethnographers have variously shared experiences of living with a dying spouse, performing as a pole dancer, living with a debilitating illness, being a parent of an asthmatic child, and so on (for a review, see, Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). While autoethnographic inquiry is not yet a fixture in psychology, I choose to include it here, both to illustrate the contrast in genres of inquiry, and because it has moved with such alacrity across the social sciences disciplines.

In terms of underlying epistemology, this shift represent a major divergence from traditional empiricism, and indeed, all the above forms of qualitative inquiry. All these traditions make a clear separation between the observer and the observed, subject and object. Yet, within broad sectors of the social sciences, such traditions have all become suspect. How, it is asked, can any researcher legitimately describe, speak for, or legitimately characterize others? Don't researchers approach "the object" from a particular standpoint or tradition, steeped in their own values, and limited by their own vocabulary of description and explanation? Does such study not discredit or eliminate the voices of those under study, and worse still, claim its accounts are "objectively" superior? Faced with the prospects of becoming instruments of Western colonialism, such critiques have had a major impact on anthropological research (see, e.g., Marcus & Fischer, 1986). Autoethnography serves as a significant alternative, as there is no subject/object split. The cultural participant provides first-hand insights into a way of life, in his or her own terms. The goals of such inquiry echo certain aims of narrative research focused on cultural illumination. However, most autoethnography adds further dimension in its attempt to open a direct empathic relationship with the reader. One doesn't typically read autoethnography for information, but is invited to "experience with" the writer, potentially a very powerful form of edification.

Action Research

Action research has played an active, if minor, role in psychology for over 50 years. In recent years, however, action research has burgeoned. In addition to such journals as *Action Research*, the *International Journal of Action Research*, and *Systemic and Action Research*, there is Reason and Bradbury's (2008) *Handbook of Action Research*. In the main, action researchers typically participate with groups or organizations to achieve social change. Often this work is motivated by investments in equality or social justice. In this sense, unlike traditional empiricists, and sharing much with critical discourse analysts, action researchers are avowedly value invested. Ideology is not an interference with objectivity; it is the *raison d'être* of research. Action research is also resonant with autoethnography in its attempt to undermine the distance between the researcher and those "under study." The action orientation differs dramatically from traditional empiricism (and certain genres of qualitative inquiry), in one major respect. The empiricist project is based on the assumption of a stable world, that is, a world of entities, structures or processes about which increasing knowledge can be accumulated over time. The very concept of research—to search and to search again—sustains this vision. In contrast, action research is grounded in a vision of a fluid or impermanent world. All patterns of action are subject to change. Attempting to increase knowledge through repeated study is problematic. The challenge is to directly change the world.

In sum, I have offered here five alternatives to the assumptions and aims of traditional empiricist inquiry. Rather than testing hypotheses for purposes of prediction and control, they attempt to probe the structure of human meaning, liberate the reader from oppressive conventions, give voice to oppressed minorities, reveal forms of cultural life through personal revelation, and actively change society. Each of these ends is linked to relevant ontologies, epistemologies, and values. Further, these five forms of qualitative inquiry are only suggestive of the broad array of practices currently in play within the field. With sufficient time and space, attention could also be directed to practices of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997), performative inquiry (Gergen & Gergen, 2012),

case study analysis (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000), archival research (Corti, 2004), focus groups (Fern, 2001), interviewing (Josselson, 2013), grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2005), arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012), oral history (Shapes, 2011), and situational analysis (Clarke, 2005), among many others. To be sure, there is some overlap in values and assumptions among these and other forms of inquiry. However, the above accounts usefully demonstrate the substantial contrasts in assumptions and values extant within psychology today. And by implication, they demonstrate the problematics of asserting univocal criteria of excellence across the range of qualitative endeavors.

Excellence Within Communities of Practice

Once cognizant of the multiple ontologies, epistemologies, purposes, and values at play within the qualitative arena, we can appreciate the need for multiple orientations toward evaluation. It is useful here to draw from Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of *communities of practice*. Such communities share a craft, including information, experiences, and a way of doing things. It is important that they also share tacit knowledge, forms of understanding and action that are unarticulated but essential for participation in the community (Davenport & Prusak, 2002). In this context, we see that all forms of qualitative inquiry are typically the outcome of negotiated agreements among participants in a community. Thus, if prediction and control are aims of inquiry, sophisticated participants within this community will readily be able to identify qualities of excellence; similarly for those involved in phenomenology, action research, and so on. For illustrative purposes, it is useful to touch on some of the criteria of excellence often—though not always—employed within these various domains. Although there are overlapping concerns, the following point to some of the important differences.

Phenomenology

The field of phenomenology is scarcely unified, and one must distinguish among at least three different orientations. There are researchers strongly influenced by Edmund Husserl,

others by Martin Heidegger, and a third—and by far the largest group—loosely equating phenomenology with the study of personal meaning. There are subtle but significant differences between the first two in terms of assumptions and practices. The third group simply uses phenomenology as a catchword for a large range of practices that ostensibly seem to tap personal meaning. For illustrative purposes, we may consider a significant aspect of Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method. In most forms of inquiry the theory (and possibly the ideology) of the researcher are of paramount importance. In the empiricist case, the researcher begins with a hypothesis to test; the culturally oriented narrative researcher will seek a dominant narrative; and ideological commitments heavily color the practices of critical discourse analysis and action research. However, Giorgi argues for a “bracketing” of all preconceptions and values, with the researcher remaining fully open to the experiences being communicated by the subject. Researcher's descriptive analysis should be driven insofar as possible by the subject's structures of meaning alone. In terms of comparative criteria of excellence, the major point is that in descriptive phenomenology—unlike many other practices—one's analysis should be devoid of theoretical and ideological prefiguration. In addition to this essential criterion, also valued are analyses that focus on the individual's experience as opposed to environmental influences, that integrate disparate elements into a unified whole, and that provide insights into a larger group of which the individual is a representative.

Discourse Analysis

Given the enormous range in the goals and styles of discourse analysis, it is futile to generate criteria of excellence common to all. For comparative purposes, critical discourse analysis does offer interesting contrasts. Given that its chief aim is liberation from convention, one of the most important criteria of excellence is the rhetorical power of the critique. Is it obscure or limpid in its prose, or is it capable of activating the reader's sense of social justice? This demand is closely linked to the interpretive plausibility of the analysis. While not relying on numbers, samples, reliability, and so on, can the analyst—like a good lawyer—make a case for

his or her interpretation? It must also be recognized that the community of critical discourse analysis is strongly liberal in political leaning. Thus favored will be analyses that focus on dominance, suppression, and injustice (van Dijk, 1993).

There is a more interesting and subtle point to be made, relevant not only to discourse analysts but to virtually all research influenced by postmodern thought. One of the central outcomes of postmodern theory is the destruction of the picture theory of language, that is, the assumption that language can function as a picture (mirror or map) of the world as it is. Writ large, this is to say that theory is not driven by observation, and what we take to be scientific truth is the outcome of social conventions established among communities of scientists. For many, this has meant replacing empiricist foundationalism with a pragmatic view of science; the quest is not for Truth, but for useful outcomes according to some set of values. This line of reasoning has led to broad concern with the assumption of scientific validity. If there is no privileged relationship between theoretical concepts or categories, and one's observations, then how can we speak of a scientific account as valid? There is no privileged language of representation, and thus whatever sense we have of validity must rely solely on social convention. On the one hand, this has meant active discussion of alternatives to the notion of objective validity (see, e.g., Lather, 1989; Kvale, 1995). Concepts such as *interpretive validity*, *transformational*, and *catalytic validity*, circulate broadly within postmodern circles. Most important for present purposes, in abandoning the concept of empirical validity, there is a resultant resistance against traditional realist rhetoric in describing one's research outcomes. Such discourse is both misleading and divisive. Thus, it is a mark of excellence within various enclaves of discourse analysis if the researcher includes critical reflection on the constructed character of his or her inquiry, and can locate means of inviting the reader into reflective dialogue on the practice of inquiry.

Narrative Inquiry

Criteria of narrative analysis have been widely discussed (see, e.g., Riessman, 2007; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Bamberg, 2012),

and similar to most qualitative arenas, the multiple aims of inquiry favor different orientations to standards of excellence. As we have seen, in the case of research attempting to provide insight into the lives of the oppressed or marginalized, some of the criteria common to the positivist/empiricist program are relevant. The lives of those researched should be reasonably representative of the groups they are supposed to represent. Their stories, in whatever form attained, constitute evidence for the researcher's generalizations. However, for narrative researchers in this case, a significant ethical dimension is added to what counts as good research (see especially Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Excellence is typically achieved by showing respect or otherwise honoring the voice of those represented. In my view, this sense of respect reflects a more general humanist orientation to inquiry. In one notable case, for example, Lather and Smithies (1997) introduced readers to the experiences of women living with HIV/AIDS. Rather than interviewing and interpreting their accounts, the researchers simply included the women's verbatim expressions in the volume. However, the pages of the book were split in various ways so the authors could also feature their own reflections. Further, to be responsible to their more traditional colleagues, the authors included still further sections that featured more formal theory and research outcomes. In effect, research excellence and humanist values were fully entwined.

Autoethnography

Because most people feel they have interesting and important things to say about their lives, autoethnographic explorations have rapidly multiplied. And because the practice is also relatively new to the social sciences, the criteria of excellence remain fluid. At the same time, critics have relentlessly attacked autoethnography for its unreliability, personal biases, and lack of generalizability. From the present standpoint such critiques are largely unwarranted, as they essentially reflect the assumptions and values of traditional empiricism. The aim of autoethnography is not to test hypotheses or build laws of behavior, and its participants actively eschew the empiricist assumption that observers are capable of unbiased accounts of the other. Most important for the autoethnographer, then, is to draw the reader into an ulterior form of

life, and to do so in a way that the reader can viscerally feel or identify with the author. Thus, in the autoethnographic community a premium is placed on the quality of writing, and its rhetorical potential to draw the reader close. Good autoethnographic reporting differs from most forms of qualitative and quantitative research in its approximation to works of literature. Further, a value is typically placed on the ability of the writer to provide insights into the lives of a particular group (i.e., being imprisoned, having an eating disorder), and to linking the life-experience account to broader theoretical issues.

Action Research

For many action researchers, the act of sharing knowledge through scholarly exposition is a secondary concern. And, because the situations in which action researchers are engaged are so varied—sometimes dramatically so—it has been difficult for the community to lay down hard and fast rules as to what counts as excellence. The success of any project, while valued by empiricist researchers in terms of statistical significance, does not figure as a necessary criterion of excellence. For action researchers, “we learn by our failures.” And, unlike empiricists, the ideological implications of the effort do make a difference. A project helping street people to organize, for example, would be valued in a way that helping insurance salesmen to make more profit would not. For action researchers, the orientation to representation also differs from many other qualitative scholars. Goals of verisimilitude, rhetorical power, empathy, and “writerliness” are overshadowed by the desire to share practices in a straightforward way. The primary aim is to show others how they might proceed. Clarity in the service of social change is essential.

Criteria Beyond Community?

Attempts to generate general criteria of excellence flourish across the social sciences (cf. Devers, 1999; Elliott et al., 1999; Fossey et al., 2002; Horsburgh, 2003; Lietz & Zayas, 2010; Maxwell, 2011; Morse, 2003; Jeanfreau & Jack, 2010). By and large, such attempts fall into one of two camps: positivist or postpositivist. As previously argued, positivist criteria are largely inapplicable to many forms of qualitative inquiry. For example, criteria such as validity,

value neutrality, population sampling, and generalizability are simply irrelevant to most of the practices discussed above. One could argue that such practices are therefore unscientific, but this would be to assume that the concept of science is by definition positivist. This would both deny the historical vicissitudes in the concept of science (see, e.g., Danziger, 1990; Poovey, 1998), and the admission of theoretical physics into the halls of science.

Postpositivist attempts to provide across-the-board standards are more liberal, but continue to flounder under the weight of paradigm multiplicity. For example, the prominent postpositivist Johnny Saldaña (2011) lays out the criteria of excellence he finds important across the full range of inquiry. As he proposes, all qualitative research should provide new knowledge (fresh insight, information, perspective), be relevant or applicable to people’s lives and practices, and be rigorous (thorough, scholarly, intellectually coherent). It is difficult to imagine a research practice for which these would not be relevant criteria of excellence. At the same time, however, one might be concerned with what count as instantiations of excellence. What is new knowledge for one community may be banal or trivial for another. Within the scholarly community, research relevant to practices of health care would likely pass muster, while research speaking to issues of good grooming would not. And there are clearly limits to rigor: a report citing 20 scholarly articles would probably be preferred to one citing 200; a chatty narrative would most likely be preferred to a report in the style of analytic philosophy.

Other Saldaña criteria are also compelling, but questionable when applied uniformly across communities of practice. While Saldaña champions research that respects participant voices, critical discourse analysis is significant precisely in its attempt to undermine dominant discourses. And, while most qualitative researchers would agree with Saldaña’s emphasis on pragmatic outcomes over theory (which he finds “pretentious”), for many scholars the very rationale for research lies in its relevance to a theoretical framework. Other accounts run into similar problems of generalized prescriptions. In their appraisal, Fossey et al. (2002) proclaim that “central to good qualitative research is whether the subjects’ subjective meanings, actions, and social contexts, as understood by

them, are illuminated” (p. 717). Many discourse researchers would indeed reject the presumption that subjective meanings can be illuminated at all. Criteria of excellence may also shift and develop as the dialogue of evaluation unfolds. For example, Frosh (2007) criticizes narrative research for producing integrated accounts of individual experience, thus failing to recognize the polyvocality of the person, and suppressing the range of “that which could not be said.” Many within the postpositivist arena also emphasize the importance of *reflexivity* as a criterion of excellence. Yet, as Finlay (2002) points out, there are multiple forms of reflexivity, each of which has certain advantages and liabilities.

In sum, there is good reason for caution in establishing practice-wide criteria of excellence. This is not, however, to plump for hard and fast criteria that are practice-specific. Not only would this impede the kind of reflective dialogue that will emerge from shifting views and values, but would also be injurious to the development of new practices. I will visit this topic momentarily. In my view, it may be most useful to the field to share a set of highly general criteria, minimally specifying the kinds of activities honored within the broad spectrum of qualitative inquiry. For example, does the research contribute further to our understanding, is it linked to relevant dialogues in the field, is it rigorous in design and implementation, and is the writing coherent and understandable? Such abstract criteria leave open the possibilities for multiple interpretations, specific to the various traditions of practice.

The Perils of Excellence

As I am proposing, the many disparate communities now contributing to the field of qualitative inquiry each thrive on locally negotiated agreements concerning “good science.” In a sense, each constitutes a “discipline,” inasmuch as it drifts toward setting standards of practice for its participants. And, while there is much to be said for recognizing and systematizing criteria of excellence, it is also important to recognize significant shortcomings. Most prominently, in establishing disciplined practices, one also produces constraint. Courses in research methods focus on the established practices, researchers feel comfortable by participating in the given conventions, journal reviewers feel

justified in using the conventional criteria, and the academic system rewards those who remain within the community. Yet, it is precisely this inertial movement and attendant self-satisfaction that has—for decades—stunted the growth and development of qualitative practices in psychology. So powerful was the grip of the empiricist vision of psychology that qualitative inquiry was under threat of extinction.

It is the freedom from foundational constraints that has sparked the explosion in qualitative initiatives in the social sciences more generally. With this freedom from foundations, researchers have generated an enormous range of new research practices, thus enriching prodigiously the potentials of the social sciences. Recent entries into the domain of qualitative inquiry include critical arts-based research, ethnodrama, oral history, online ethnography, poetry, composite short stories, dialogue, and a host of visual innovations. Further, with expanding critiques of the Western values saturating traditional research methods (see, e.g., Smith, 1999), there is a mounting demand for including the world’s offerings of indigenous methods into the social sciences. As Smith and Deemer (2000) note in their essay on “The Problem of Criteria in the Age of Relativism,” there are no rational foundations for exclusion. And as Correa (2013) underscores, practices of inquiry also involve moral and political issues. Thus, summarily closing the door on any form of research practice would constitute an oppressive act. Opening a space for hybrids and innovations is essential. As Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) propose, to retain their vibrancy, communities of practice must evolve with changing circumstances. Hard and fast standards of excellence stifle the evolutionary process. In Andrew Sparkes’ (2002) words, one must resist the temptation to “seek universal foundational criteria, lest one form of dogma simply replaces another” (p. 223).

Toward a Reflective Pragmatism

One limitation in the continuing discussion of research excellence is the focus on the practices of inquiry themselves. Indeed, the entirety of the present analysis—focusing as it does on five different practices—follows this tradition. I have also noted, however, that each practice is linked to a particular set of goals—illuminating

experience, reducing social distance, direct social change—and the like. Such goals fall rather naturally from the ontologies, epistemologies, and values implicit in the practices. In this sense, by adding new practices of inquiry to the discipline, we add to its potential endeavors. However, in thinking about research excellence it is also useful to reverse the emphasis, beginning with the goals we might wish to accomplish, and then asking about the practices of inquiry enabling these goals to be achieved. We have been victims, in this sense, of what Chamberlain (2000) calls “methodolatry”, that is, the tendency to give primary attention to one’s methods of study over the ends one hopes to achieve.

An opening to this reversal of emphasis is found in Flick’s (2007) call for “method-appropriate criteria.” In asking whether the research practice matches the goals of inquiry, the question of excellence in practice per se is diminished, and the assumptive background of the practice becomes muted. We move, then to a fully pragmatic orientation to inquiry. The chief question becomes, “what do you wish to accomplish?” With the goal of inquiry now salient, two issues of excellence follow. First, what practice(s) will maximally enable the goal to be achieved—whether, for example, it is social critique, community organizing, or exploring the effects of smoking on attention. Are there multiple practices that may be deployed? Would it be most useful to create a new practice? In this case we would be less focused on whether the research were performed according to a particular community’s standards, and most concerned with if whether one’s practices—of whatever sort—contributed to the outcome. If we come to view research practices in this way, they would essentially become *supportive resources* in the service of achieving one or more specific goals. What resources are needed to “make the case,” “change a school system,” “predict a given activity,” and so on. Choices here can be both wise and foolish; a *reflective pragmatism* is essential.

Yet, reflection on the means to an end is insufficient. As the preceding analysis makes clear, all practices of inquiry carry with them values. In their implementation we sustain these values. Such effects may be subtle, as in the case of intelligence testing and DSM categorizations. Both methods of measurement con-

struct a world in which certain classes of people are valued over others. In other instances—critical discourse analysis and action research—the researcher’s values are transparent. If pluralism is to flourish within the spectrum of qualitative inquiry, and if the field is to be responsive and responsible to the broader society, reflection on the ideological and political consequences of one’s goals and practices is essential. In the choice and creation of practices, we favor forms of life. Inquiry without reflection on what is being favored and for whom is ultimately injurious to the profession and public alike.

Providential Practices of Evaluation

Psychological science is now entering a period of major transition. We have experienced almost a century of dominance by a foundational view of empirical science. And, regardless of its foibles, this view did provide stable and widely shared guidelines for excellence in inquiry. Such a view, however, could only be sustained through insularity. We now witness the rapid and global expansion of perspectives, visions, and goals of inquiry. And, with the emergence of multiple new voices on the scientific scene—bearing different epistemologies, ontologies, and values—the criteria for research excellence become obscured. Drawing from the preceding account, I offer the following conclusions.

–The wholesale application of empiricist criteria of excellence to a vast range of practices within the qualitative domain is unwarranted and obfuscating. We confront in psychology and the social sciences more generally, a wide spectrum of research paradigms, none of which possess rational or ideological grounds for claiming superiority. The empiricist paradigm is only one among many, with both potentials and limitations.

–Except at the most general level, we may properly abandon the quest for univocal criteria of research excellence. We should welcome continuing dialogue on issues of excellence, but without attempting to legislate for all.

–Criteria of excellence can be recognized within separate research communities, and such criteria are linked to the specific conceptions and values shared within these communities. With community stability, criteria of excellence

may become clear, and their application may be considered locally legitimate.

–Community understandings are fragile; conceptions and values evolve over time. Thus, major criteria at one point in time may be marginal at another. Community borders are also porous, so that new hybrids may emerge at any time. Criteria of excellence should remain open to continuous reflection.

–As an approach to inquiry and evaluation, a reflective pragmatism may be optimal. Paramount in this case is first the question of whether the supporting practices effectively contribute to the achievement of one’s aims, and second, whether there is sufficient reflection on the values being championed and suppressed.

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