

Keynote Address

Qualitative Research as Reflective Practice: Towards Humility and Engagement in the Social Sciences

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1. Introduction

Good evening. It is an honor to address you tonight as you prepare to start three exciting days of conversation about ethnographic and qualitative research in education. My goal is to share with you some thoughts triggered by the central theme of this year's Conference, "Qualitative research: leading the way toward a deeper understanding of education and society".

Let me start with a provocative position by problematizing the idea itself. Confronted by this title, the first question that comes to mind is: what is the meaning of "leading the way" in the context of qualitative research practices? In order to accept the premise of the conference's title, we must also be prepared to view qualitative researchers as members of a particular community

Leadership is something that happens in community. It requires the collective effort of a group of individuals (in this case qualitative researchers) who view themselves as sharing some common vision that is worth pursuing. According to Wilfred Drath, author of "The Deep Blue Sea: Rethinking the Sources of Leadership", leading is not something one person does to others who then become followers. Instead, Drath proposes a relational view of leadership. Drath argues that "leadership happens when a group of

people in a community creates a shared understanding of their mutual and moral obligations so that their common cause is realized”. Hence, to assume a leadership role, qualitative researchers must confront their identity as members of a very specific community of practice. This is not something we can take for granted.

Think about this for a moment. Qualitative research encompasses multiple perspectives, multiple voices: from King et al who, in their book “Designing Social Inquiry” claim that qualitative research must follow the same logic of inference as quantitative research if it is to be good scientific research; to someone like Erica Burman, who in her article “Minding the Gap: Positivism, Psychology, and the Politics of Qualitative Methods” argues that qualitative research represents a completely different paradigm, one with rules and standards that are incommensurable with non-qualitative paradigms. From qualitative scholarship in history, philosophy and the humanities, to the multiple social and behavioral sciences, each with their own ways of seeing the world and with its own research traditions.

The community of qualitative researchers therefore, if it does exist, represents a space that is complex, diverse and full of controversies and contradictions. What binds us together? What do we hold in common, that creates potential for community? More importantly, if we do recognize ourselves as members of this community, is it possible to make the claim that this community can take or should take the lead in providing a deeper understanding about education and society? What would this mean? I would like to invite you to explore these questions with me tonight.

My presentation will be structured in three parts:

- First I will explore the source of identity for practitioners of qualitative research so that we can talk about community and therefore about leadership. I will make the case that despite the profound differences within the field of qualitative research, indeed, qualitative researchers can view each other as members of a distinct group whose identity is based on sharing what I call a “relational stance” to their research practice. Hence leadership is possible.
- Second, I argue that leadership is not only possible but also necessary for several reasons. On the one hand, because the very nature of the assumptions that define the practice of qualitative research make it vulnerable to the

politics of knowledge and representation. This is compounded with the potential threat of a conservative backlash in political and policy circles, and the potential use of these politics to revert progressive policy based on qualitative research, in areas such as education.

- Finally, having argued that there is indeed a community to lead, and that leadership is needed, in the third part I will suggest ways qualitative researchers can engage in leadership strategies to participate in the agenda proposed by this conference's theme.

My overarching argument is that qualitative research has a humanist vocation, and this gives it great potential to become a counterforce to the tendency to reify scientific knowledge and use this to maintain or reproduce the status quo. Ultimately, leadership from qualitative research today means helping social science regain the humility needed to recognize that there are many ways of knowing, and that this pluralism can help us gain a deeper understanding of education and society.

But before I start, let me briefly present my own biases upfront, in the spirit of reflexivity.

- From a disciplinary point of view, as a sociologist I bring a social science bias to my understanding of qualitative research.
- From an institutional point of view, I have been in a professional, interdisciplinary school for the past 4 years. My school specializes in public policy and management in the broad field that we have labeled public service.
- From a practice point of view, I am a practitioner of qualitative research and a teacher of these techniques. In my teaching I am concerned with the dual message that qualitative research must be both rigorous and humble. Theoretical and methodological rigor become apparent in a strong but flexible research design. Humility has to do with the need to remember that research only offers “glimpses” of the world; perspectives that help us better understand something about it, rather than Truth with capital T.
- Finally, at a personal level, my life has been marked with experiences both as an insider and an outsider. I was born in the US but raised in Colombia, South

America, came back to the US 20 years ago, and viewed my self as an observer of this society for a long time. This personal history has been critical in gaining my present social identity as an insider.

These are all important aspects of the self that I value and claim as sources of strength. They are also a source of paradox and contradiction: I am a quasi-immigrant navigating the US ivory tower, a sociologist working in a professional school that favors applied research, a qualitative researcher working in a rationally oriented policy school. No wonder I often find myself espousing views that are alternative to the dominant perspective. This is, clearly, both a blessing and a curse. It makes my life more difficult, but it also keeps me on my feet and forces me to be careful about my claims and reflective of my assumptions. In that sense, I view myself as a “reflective practitioner” in my roles as teacher and researcher. According to Don Schon, good practitioners engage in reflective conversations with the situation, where they combine both elements of technical rationality with a good dose of intuition and craftsmanship. I believe that a good qualitative researcher must view him or herself, first and foremost, as a reflective practitioner who addresses the challenges of a particular mode of knowing that is full of uncertainty and controversy. Having presented my agenda, let us now proceed.

2. Can leadership happen? (Or: In search of our identity as Qualitative Researchers)

My first task is to explore whether we can actually talk about qualitative researchers as members of a community that can therefore commit to enacting leadership. My goal is therefore to answer the question: does the practice of qualitative research provide a shared identity that creates community?

At this point I would like to invite you to think for a second about the following question: Why do I consider myself a qualitative researcher? (Or what is the essence of my identity as a qualitative researcher?) *Now share with your neighbor the gist of your answer. Explain to that person briefly, in 30 seconds, what defines you as a Qualitative Researcher. Then listen to the other person. Please keep in mind your answer as you listen to my reflections. I hope to come back to them later.*

In my case, all the projects I have done after my dissertation have involved exclusively qualitative methods. But at the same time, I have used a variety of qualitative strategies and research traditions according to context. For example, consider my recent work on how governments try to be more accountable to citizens in Latin American countries and how this relates to efforts of democratization. In this study we used a very traditional comparative case studies methodology, based on in-depth interviews with public managers and extensive review of official documents. The data collection and analysis were based on a relatively controlled protocol in each of four countries studied. Because we were a team of researchers, one from each country, we needed to ensure some level of comparability across the cases, and we looked for patterns of differences and similarities.

In contrast, in the domestic work I am doing now on leadership for social change, the emphasis is on meaning making. In this work we ask in what ways communities doing social change engage in the work of leadership. We developed a multi-modal qualitative design that combines ethnographic work, cooperative inquiry (which is a form of action research) and narrative inquiry. Because we view leadership as a meaning making process in communities of practice, we are interested in trying to enter that experience through the use of story telling and other less conventional forms of representation.

Using Denzin and Lincoln's terms from the Handbook of Qualitative Research, I am in conversation with two different "interpretive communities", one of a more post-positivist bent, the other of a more interpretivist bent. These are two very different approaches to qualitative research, but both are indeed, qualitative. My identity as qualitative researcher resides in the fact that I feel comfortable going from one to the other very naturally, despite the different assumptions each holds.

The publishing of the two editions of Denzin and Lincoln's "Handbook of Qualitative Research" provides an excellent point of reference to think about issues of identity. What happened between the two dates of publication illustrates the potential for community. In 1994 Denzin and Lincoln describe the field as characterized by "essential paradigmatic differences, inherent contradictions among styles and types of research, and barriers of disciplinary, national, racial, cultural and gender differences" (p. x).

Six years later, in their 2000 edition, while still recognizing the diversity, they now address qualitative research as a “field of study in its own right” (p. xviii). Of significance in the second edition is the introduction of the term “interpretive communities” as a way to refer to the variety of approaches taken by those involved in doing qualitative research and an inquiry project.

I believe that what seems to bind together the diverse group of researchers, who are members of these communities, is an approach to inquiry that at its core takes a relational stance in the practice of research. This stance takes two interrelated forms. One is reactive, and one is proactive. The reactive form is a stance by which the qualitative researcher distances from or rejects the hegemony of positivism as the dominant mode of scientific inquiry. The proactive form is a stance by which the qualitative researcher either accepts or embraces engagement with the world as legitimate and desirable.

Denzin and Lincoln observe that qualitative research refers to the name for a reformist movement in the academy. This reactive stance rejects the dominant, distanced, objective, value-neutral, control oriented approach of positivism. At the key of this rejection is the idea of multiple ways of knowing, all of which may be valid.

These ideas define qualitative research as an approach to inquiry that is contested in nature. This opposition to the taken-for-granted inquiry project of positivism represents the first sign of the potential for community around qualitative research. Our inclination or even commitment to qualitative research is not just a preference based on “taste” or a knee jerk reaction, but instead, it represents a deliberate challenge and questioning of some of the basic tenets that have defined what constitute valid understandings of the world. These tenets have placed supreme confidence in science with capital S as the only source of valid knowledge (Crotty, p 27) and have defined science in a very restricted and exclusionary way. As scientific experts become almost a “class” on their own, this is an approach to the world that is arrogant at its base.

Parker Palmer illustrates this idea beautifully in his book “The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life”. Palmer talks about objectivism, the underlying mode of knowing espoused by positivism as a “fearful way of knowing”, he says, “a mode promoted with such arrogance that it is hard to see the fear behind it—until one remembers that arrogance often masks fear” (p. 50). He describes this mode of

knowing as one where the only way to know something is from afar, by relying exclusively on reason and facts, logic and data. Palmer goes on to say that this mode of knowing, “portrays truth as something we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally, from the thing we want to know” (p. 51).

In contrast, Palmer talks about science as engagement with the world, “a live encounter between the knower and the known”. An encounter with moments of distance, but also with “moments of intimacy.” He goes on to say: “Knowing is a human way to seek relationship and, in the process, to have encounters and exchanges that will inevitably alter us. At its deepest reaches, knowing is always communal” (p. 54).

Indeed, the idea that understanding requires engagement is at the core of qualitative research practice, and defines the proactive stance of qualitative research. Here, rather than just rejecting positivism, we have an affirming stance. Everet and Louis (1981) call this stance “inquiry from the inside” and distinguish it from what they call “inquiry from the outside”. Inquiry from the inside and Inquiry from the outside differ according to the degree of immersion of the researcher in terms of experiential engagement, existential commitment to the subject and the extent of physical involvement in the setting.

- Inquiry from the inside assumes that the researcher can better know by being immersed in the stream of events and activities, thus becoming part of the phenomenon studied, rather than detaching from the setting.
- It assumes that knowledge is validated experientially rather than by methodological procedure and logic.
- It assumes that the best instrument is the researcher as actor, as opposed to the researcher as the one who observes through instrumentation.
- Finally, inquiry from the inside aims to learn by getting a holistic picture from historically unique situations, where idiosyncrasies are important for meaning.

So we can distill the two elements that define the practice of qualitative researchers independent of what stream of qualitative research they espouse. These two elements have in common that they stem from a relational stance. The first element is a distancing or in cases even a rejection of the dominant mode of scientific inquiry. Here the stance is reactive, against positivism. The second one is an acceptance or in cases an embracing of

the notion that understanding must pass through engagement. Here the stance is proactive, around a constructive idea, that of “inquiry from the inside”. In this relational stance we find the seeds for a common identity. Using Reason and Bradbury’s words from the Handbook of Action Research, in contrast to positivism, this relational stance presumes “a multiplicity of ways of knowing that start from a relationship between self and other, through participation and intuition” (p. 9).

But Everet and Louis remind us that while inquiry from the outside can be generally equated with logical positivism, inquiry from the inside does not have a single equivalent. Instead, there are myriad ways in which this mode of inquiry is implemented. Some people distance while others reject positivism and some people accept while others embrace inquiry from the inside. The different degrees of distancing from classical positivism, as well as the various degrees of commitment to the assumptions of ‘inquiry from the inside’ can help explain differences in the strands of qualitative research, all characterized by being “non-positivist”.

Since our relational stance is not uniform, the differences among qualitative research practices can be placed in a continuum, from those closest to positivism to those farther from it. In the left side there are qualitative researchers who have inherited and still espouse some of the basic tenets of ‘inquiry from the outside,’ but they have understood the limits of this mode and value ‘inquiry from the inside’ as a helpful way to study phenomena hard to approach with quantitative research. These post positivists use qualitative research to capture aspects of the world that other quantitative positivist methods have not been able to capture (Burman, p. 789).

In his book “The foundations of Social Research” (1998) Crotty describes post-positivism as a less arrogant form of positivism. Post-positivists talk about probability rather than certainty and they aspire to reach a level of objectivity rather than absolute objectivity. In this context, qualitative research becomes an important complement to other more exact methods. Practiced at its best, post-positivist research is based on the understanding that you will never attain truth, and here in lies the possibility of a shared identity with other qualitative researchers.

What triggered this shift in post-positivism from aspiring to Truth with a capital T to aspiring only to get “glimpses of the world?” Of course, we all know the relevance of

philosophers of science such as Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend. I will not bore you with the details of the debates, let me just mention some quickly ideas here:

With his idea of “falsification” as opposed to verification, Popper reminds us that “every scientific statement must remain tentative for ever” (p Popper, 280, cited in Crotty). His version of positivism values tentativeness, and some degree of guesswork and intuition, and even some humility.

Kuhn questions the value-free neutrality attributed to scientific discovery and portrays science as a very human affair. Progress happens via competitions among paradigms, that is, overarching set of beliefs and constructs that help scientists make sense of the world. Scientific revolutions are radical shifts in the way scientists view reality.

Feyerabend pushes both Popper and Kuhn one step further in de-bunking the myth of science. Feyerabend reminds us that scientific thinking is historically conditioned like any other thought system and that “neither science nor rationality are universal measures of excellence. They are particular traditions, unaware of their historical grounding” (p. 214). It is this lack of awareness what may produce arrogance in its practitioners. Calling for a pluralistic methodology and using his characteristically acute style, he says: “science must be protected from ideologies; and societies, especially democratic societies, must be protected from science” (p. viii).

These debates have had an impact in the practice of positivism both in the natural and social sciences. As a humbler version of the scientific approach, post-positivism no longer claims an epistemologically or metaphysically privileged position. And it is within this context that contemporary post-positivists have rediscovered the power of ‘inquiry from the inside.’

In the opposite side of the continuum is postmodernism, an approach to inquiry that, rather than modifying it, wants to reject and replace positivism and other manifestations of modernity. Best and Kellner define postmodernism by its relativist assumptions “that theories at best provide partial perspectives on their objects,” and “that all cognitive representations of the world are historically and linguistically mediated” (p. 4). Hence, postmodernists are ‘antirealists’ who explore how language, power and history shape human views of reality, truth and knowledge (Hollinger, 177). Down playing or rejecting the methods of logical positivism, postmodernists favor methods that

are qualitative, such as “radical hermeneutics, the new ethnography, textuality, deconstruction and archeology and genealogy” (p. 173). Postmodernism in its various incarnations, like post-positivism, has influenced considerably social science’s approaches to inquiry, both theoretically and methodologically.

From this parenthesis in the history of science we can draw an important conclusion in our search for the source of identity for qualitative researchers. Qualitative practices fall within a continuum with post-positivism on one end, viewing qualitative research as a softer yet helpful version of scientific research, to more interpretivist postures at the other end, where qualitative research represents a radical philosophical departure to the positivist scientific enterprise, often characterized by post-modernist sensibilities. The two sides, and everything in the middle, share the relational, contested nature of the qualitative inquiry project, both in terms of distancing from positivism and accepting “inquiry from the inside”.

One dimension that helps us see the differences within this continuum is how qualitative researchers understand the qualitative-quantitative divide. At one end, post-positivism seems to locate the qualitative-quantitative divide at the level of methods, that is, at the level of the sets of procedures and techniques used to collect and analyze data.

For example, in their “Qualitative Data Analysis Handbook,” Miles and Hubberman label themselves “transcendental realists” to convey their acceptance of different types of non-positivism. They locate themselves more toward the post-positivist side of the spectrum. Then they argue for the need to work on codifying the sets of procedures and techniques used to collect and analyze qualitative data, thus making it more credible and legitimate.

Moving up from differences in methods to differences in methodology, other scholars argue that the qualitative-quantitative divide occurs at the level of particular strategies or plans of action that link theoretical perspectives to specific methods. John Creswell’s insightful book, “Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions,” is precisely an effort to compare and contrast the underlying theoretical assumptions and the consequent methodological choices of five different qualitative research traditions: a case study, a biography, a phenomenology, a grounded theory study

and an ethnography. Each of these, he argues, draws from a particular disciplinary tradition with its particular theoretical lenses and methodological commitments.

Finally, some researchers argue that the Qualitative-Quantitative divide refers to profound differences in philosophical perspectives that have to do with beliefs about the nature of reality and of human beings (ontology) and about the nature of the relationship between the inquirer and the known (epistemology). Following Kuhn, Lincoln and Guba argue that an alignment between these elements forms a paradigm, that is, a net of beliefs that shape how researchers see the world and influences all the choices in their practice. Here, the great divide is between positivism and non-positivism.

So we must talk about multiple ways of doing qualitative research. Understanding this terrain is not easy, and we need maps to guide us. In the Handbook, Lincoln and Guba offer a very complete map, based on their detailed analysis of interpretive paradigms and how they compare to positivism's basic assumptions. Within qualitative research, they distinguish four major qualitative paradigms or interpretive frameworks, which in turn determine the social practice of the qualitative researcher: Post-positivism, Critical Theory, Constructivism and Participatory Inquiry. We can also transfer the interpretive paradigms they identify to the metaphor of the continuum. Here, in my view, is how they align. (See Figure 1)

Lincoln and Guba do say that the "blurring of the genres" has accelerated so that "the various paradigms are beginning to interbreed" (p 164). Hence, we can see why the gap between positivism and the interpretive paradigms is larger than the gap within the interpretive paradigms. This suggests the shaping of a qualitative research identity.

After this tour through the terrain of qualitative research as a practice, I am ready now to return to my original concern. I see a paradox in our identity as qualitative researchers: On the one hand, we all practice our research around a shared relational stance. On the other hand, we participate in distinct interpretive communities that differentiate our practices. While we are all qualitative research practitioners, we do not all belong to the same communities of practice.

Etienne Wenger argues in his book "Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity" (1998), that three interconnected dimensions define the existence of a community of practice: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire.

Despite the convergence within the various interpretative paradigms, I don't think members of each interpretive community are involved with each other in any sustained relationship of mutual engagement. But clearly, each interpretive paradigm may have local communities of practice whose members relate, are part of a joint enterprise, and share the same repertoire. This is the case, for example, of scholars involved in Action Research, or feminist scholars, to mention just two.

It is possible that the inquiry project of qualitative research – in as much as we agree that it exists—represents a constellation of interconnected practices, a term Wenger finds helpful to clarify how “the geography of practice” is influenced not only by boundaries but also by locality, proximity and distance (p. 126). This imagery is helpful to think about qualitative researchers engaged in smaller communities of practice that form constellations of qualitative research practice. These smaller locales of practice represent a genuine source from which to derive a qualitative research identity and from which to draw leadership.

Let me recapitulate the argument so far: Our common identity as qualitative researchers does not stem from membership in a community of practice but from proximity in a constellation of practices where members share a relational stance against positivism and toward a mode of knowing we have labeled ‘inquiry from the inside.’ Hence our identity is embedded in a landscape characterized by complexity, multiplicity, and more specifically, in Lincoln and Guba’s terms, by “paradigmatic controversies, contradictions and emerging confluences”.

What are the practical implications of this argument? The first is that there is in fact hope for us to provide leadership for a deeper understanding of education and society, if we believe this is necessary and desirable. But to do this, we must first acknowledge the contradictions that constitute our identity to ensure some coherence in our practice. I will return to this in the next part of my talk.

The second implication has to do with the dilemmas this complexity produces for the practice of socializing new scholars into the field, that is, for the teaching of qualitative research methods. Let me use my own experience to illustrate this point. I teach two doctoral courses at Wagner. One is called Theoretical Foundations of Applied Research and the other is a Qualitative Research Methods seminar. The Wagner doctoral program

is strongly “biased” toward training quantitative methodologists to study policy problems based on the rational paradigm, using the most sophisticated tools of post-positivist research.

The first course our doctoral students take, as they enter the program, is Research Methods. This course is tough from a strict positivist perspective, and out of the 14 sessions, one is on qualitative research. Students use this course to prepare to take the Preliminary Qualifying Examination (PQE) in the second semester. At that time they will be asked to demonstrate that they have the potential to develop a “research-oriented way of thinking”. They are given a policy or management problem and they must propose how to go about creating a research question and a strategy to answer it. They are asked to be very explicit about the way they would address traditional standards of goodness such as validity, reliability, and so on. When they pass the exam they are officially “married” to the program, since this is a way of both the school and the student to say, “OK we’re in this together for the long haul”. But when they pass that exam, they are also officially “married” to a positivist methodological frame, and in the best cases, to a post-positivist view of research.

When students arrive to one of my courses I have to de-sensitize them from this view, which is usually even more rigid the more neophyte the student is to research. When I teach the course Theoretical Foundations of Applied Research during their second semester at Wagner, I know students are preparing at the same time to take the PQE. I also know that they will be strictly judged by the canons of post-positivism, and there is an implicit understanding that they should not propose a qualitative design, since they must demonstrate understanding of a logic of research best exemplified by quasi-experiments or econometric models. So I warn them against bringing the new insights into their exam, to avoid unnecessary risks. This feels like a contradiction I must live with, to avoid a situation where students fall pray to the politics of knowledge.

There are also rewarding moments in teaching qualitative research. Recently, the doctoral board decided to make qualitative research methods a required course in the program, in the same way that for many years an advanced quantitative research methods has been a standard requirement. This reflects a newly gained recognition of the value of this mode of inquiry, even though it is still subordinated to the dominant paradigm. On

this happy note, I want to turn to the second half of my presentation, where I will try to answer the questions of why leadership and how qualitative research can lead the way.

Before turning attention to these questions, I would like to take a moment to ask you to go back to your initial reflection about what constitutes your identity as a qualitative researcher. Please compare your answer with anything that called your attention from what you have heard in the past half hour. What is triggered by this comparison? Share with your neighbor.

3. Why Qualitative Researchers as leaders? (Or a leadership role for Qualitative Research practitioners)

If leadership is possible, the next question we must address is: why is there a need for leadership from qualitative research today? To answer this question we must explore some good and some bad news. The good news is that a non-positivist orientation (including post-positivist and post-modernist sensibilities) has gained momentum and legitimacy within the social sciences and the humanities. Lincoln and Guba observe between the two editions of the Handbook a higher demand for training in qualitative methodologies, a larger number of studies and dissertations, and an explosion of material (texts, papers, workshops, software, etc).

The Handbook offers additional evidence of this, with an entire new section focusing on the applied uses of qualitative research, including evaluation and policy analysis. There is more evidence in other realms of social life too. About six months ago, for example, an article in the New York Times reported with amusement the recruitment and use of ethnographers in marketing firms. This development suggests an expansion of what constitutes the positive aspect of our qualitative ethos, the acceptance of the usefulness of “inquiry from the inside” to learn about the world.

This good news has practical implications at a professional level. There is hope that journals will agree to increase the number of pages required to report a good piece of qualitative research, and that articles will not be rejected because the N (number of cases) is not sufficiently large. There is hope that more and more schools will require their doctoral students to master the basics of qualitative methodologies and that these students

and new faculty will become literate and conversant in the language of the diverse interpretive communities, thus opening up more pluralistic spaces in the academy.

But this good news does not represent the whole picture. First, the trend is real but it is by no means complete or uniform. Positivism continues to be hegemonic in the academy. Many new-minted PhDs understand they must first pay their dues by doing more traditional work before they can make choices more consistent with their sensibilities. And there is the danger that the gained legitimacy may affect more positively those doing qualitative research within post-positivism than those who try to advance the craft from post-modernist or critical interpretivist perspectives. This means that qualitative researchers cannot just sit and enjoy their gained space, we must continue to expand the boundaries of this space. And this will require enacting leadership.

Consistent with this, additional bad news stem from the real danger of backlash, particularly in the post-9-11 environment. The credibility of the findings of qualitative studies is still used as a tool to make arguments for or against a case. In a way, qualitative research is at a cross roads: it has gained great momentum, but the politics of knowledge and interpretation that make it vulnerable can be combined now with the politics of exclusion and fear that have spread with the conservative winds that blow from Washington.

This mixture not only conspires against the goal of interpretive paradigms having an equal footing in the “temple of knowledge”. It can also be used to revert some of the social progress made in the past 30 years in applied research fields such as education and education policy, progress that was highly based on findings from qualitative studies.

Even though education is not my area of expertise, let me provide a brief example. Some colleagues in your field have called to my attention the debates and dynamics surrounding the work of the congressionally mandated National Reading Panel, which has influenced federal and state policies in literacy instruction. Here are a few of the issues that concern my colleagues, as reported in an article from Education Week in January of 2002:

- The goal of the panel was to review any evidence that could help policymakers push forward changes in policy to improve reading in children.

- The initial panel's findings were used to fund President Bush's Reading First initiative, which included more than \$900 million in grants for research-based reading programs.
- The panel only reviewed experimental and quasi-experimental studies on the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching reading.
- The reasons given were time limitations and the enormity of the task. This resulted in restricting the scope of the review to peer-reviewed studies with measurable results. The studies had to be replicable and generalizable to the population of students at large. They also had to study the link between the effectiveness of an instructional approach and student achievement, and the analysis had to include comparisons with students who weren't taught that way. Hence ethnographies, case studies, small-group studies and other observational research were excluded.
- In the final report the panel urged additional work to review qualitative research. Based on this recommendation, three new federal panels were formed, one for qualitative work. However, members of the NRP and officials of the organization coordinating the new review refer to qualitative research in ways that question its legitimacy. One says that he sees the need for and value of combined studies. He is concerned that people doing qualitative research are looking at different kinds of issues of less interest to policy makers. A panel member says, that because different selection criteria will be used to choose the qualitative studies to be reviewed, the review "may not be as instructive for policy purposes, but certainly it can be instructive for change purposes". This is problematic, because, as a critic says, "if the work of the qualitative panel does not directly inform policy, part of the literature could be construed as unimportant" (p. 2). Another critic argues: "I worry that this is going to be political. There are groups that would like to be able to say a federal panel looked at the body of qualitative research and did not find anything concrete" (p. 3)

This is an example of a policy debate that started before September 11 and continued to develop afterwards, now in a more fertile ground for backlash. I am sure you are aware of many more in your own field. We cannot ignore this trend.

Now that I have made the case for the importance of leadership from the field, the next and last question to tackle is how qualitative research can lead the way toward deeper understanding of education and the world.

4. How Can Qualitative Research Lead the Way? (Or: Strategies to practice leadership)

I argued earlier that our identity as qualitative researchers emerges from taking a relational stance in the practice of our research, both proactive and reactive. I have identified particular strategies for leadership around these two features of our identity. At the risk of sounding too pedagogical, I will organize the arguments in this last section around specific recommendations.

Considering the proactive source of our identity, taking leadership today has to do with belonging to a particular community of practice within the broader constellation of interpretive communities and building the bridges from there to strengthen the field. I will suggest three leadership strategies associated with this agenda. Considering the reactive source, taking leadership today has to do with living the politics of knowledge. I will propose two strategies in this arena.

Belonging and Building Bridges

How can a qualitative researcher be sufficiently anchored to engage in sound, credible research? By belonging first. Wenger describes three modes of belonging in communities of practice: alignment, engagement and imagination. Each of these suggests a potential leadership strategy for the qualitative researcher who decides to belong.

Aligning: Construct your own map of the field and clarify where you stand - As a mode of engagement, alignment means coordinating one's energy and activities to fit and contribute to a broader enterprise (Wenger, p. 173). To be able to do this well, qualitative researchers need to understand what the field looks like and clarify where they stand

within it. This means clarifying which interpretive community represents their community of practice and what it means to belong to it. This may be easy for those trained in the social sciences with particular traditions of qualitative research. It is harder for students in multidisciplinary and professional schools, where exposure to multiple interpretive communities may be done at the expense of providing opportunities to a particular tradition.

Alignment to a particular community requires creating one's own map of the constellation to which this community belongs, and clarifying one's position around the big debates and points of contention. At what level do I see the qualitative-quantitative divide resolving itself? What is my position about paradigmatic incommensurability? and so on. These are questions that may require years to answer. I believe they represent a critical way to develop our identity to be able to lead the way.

Engaging: Commit to your community's definition of rigor - The second mode of belonging is engagement, that is, in Winger's terms, "active involvement in mutual processes of negotiation of meaning" (p. 173). Each interpretive community as a community of practice will have its own standards, repertoires and canons that get negotiated as practice and conversations develop over time. There is ample opportunity for leadership around this negotiation. For qualitative researchers, practicing good qualitative research requires clarifying what the standards are and how they can be made explicit when doing research and making claims about our understanding of the social world.

Conversations about issues that represent critical tensions contributing to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of the interpretive paradigm represent areas from where to build engagement. Gergen and Gergen for example, identify three sites of controversy worth exploring from the perspective of one's community of practice: the crisis of validity and alternatives to it, the rights of representation, its control and responsibilities; and the place of the political in qualitative research (p. 1026). There is still much to resolve around these issues.

Imaging: Find new ways to reinvent your community - The third mode of belonging is imagination, that is creating new images of the world “and seeing connections through time and space by extrapolating from our own experience and ourselves” (Wenger, p. 173). We need both a commitment to the standards of goodness, and openness to discourage dogma. Imagination provides the capacity to invent new designs that align us to the canons of our community but also help push the envelope. Imagining requires building bridges by engaging in conversations and detours into other interpretive communities of practice.

I would like to briefly talk about our leadership research to illustrate these points. Our research is part of a broader effort to change the conversation about leadership, Leadership for a Changing World (LCW). We are members of a partnership consisting of the Ford Foundation (designing the program and funding it) the Advocacy Institute (administering the program) and the Wagner School (leading the research). Our mandate is to generate new knowledge using the program¹. In our paper “Leadership Narratives: An Appreciative Approach to Understanding Leadership” we have described our research project using four metaphors: lens, focus, stance and methodology.

- **Lens** - we adopted a particular lens to study leadership, one that views leadership as a social construction. This means that people carry mental models (deeply ingrained assumptions or images) of leadership and that leadership is itself a shared act of meaning making in the context of a group’s work to accomplish a common purpose.
- **Focus** - a social construction lens led us to pay attention to *the work of leadership* more than the behaviors of people we call leaders. If leadership is about meaning making, then it is inevitably relational and collective, and therefore, we will not understand it by looking only at individual traits or behaviors. Instead, it is the experience of leadership itself as it is expressed in the work of the group that must be studied.
- **Stance** - once we decided to focus on the work of leadership – specifically meaning making, not the leader – then, it made sense to involve the people

¹ See <http://leadershipforchange.org/research/>

engaged in the work. Hence, we invited a group of ‘leaders’, the award recipients of LCW, to stand with us to inquire together about the meaning of leadership, thus studying the work of leadership from the inside. Our stance is one of co-production: we as co-researchers do research with leaders on leadership.

- **Methodology** - having clarified the lens, elaborated the implications for focus and stance, certain *methods* followed naturally. Framing out research within the broad family of action inquiry, we created a multi-modal research design that would allow us to capture the experience of leadership from several different angles. We chose to use narrative inquiry, ethnography, and cooperative inquiry, each with specific research questions negotiated with the awardees, all under a broad guiding question: In what ways do communities trying to make social change engage in the work of leadership?

Using Lincoln and Guba’s map, we are drawing from the Constructivist, the Critical and the Participative paradigms and our lens and methods are appropriately aligned. In turn, we are committed to a solid but flexible research design that guides our practice and imposes the standards of goodness we have agreed to follow. Finally, we imagined and are implementing an innovative and ambitious project that is at the leading edge of qualitative research on leadership.

Let us now turn to leadership strategies associated with the reactive source of our identity, that is, our challenge to positivism. These have to do with issues of power and politics.

Living the politics of knowledge

Living the politics of knowledge means recognizing that science is also a contested terrain where conflict and power play a role, as the National Reading Panel example suggests. Making no choice is a choice and acknowledging power, qualitative researchers can learn to live the politics of knowledge in a constructive way. Recognizing the politics of knowledge and deciding to address its implications requires making a choice about how we use our research. In other words, this is ultimately a matter of

politics rather than a matter of epistemology, theory, methodology or technique. Here are two suggestions to start thinking about this choice.

Embrace the humanistic vocation offered by the qualitative inquiry project - The two sources of shared identity for qualitative researchers point to what Burman calls its “humanist impulse.” Our relational stance make us highly sensitive and concerned with protecting the integrity of human beings in the research relationship and in putting the goals of the research at the service of bettering the human condition. In embracing this vocation, qualitative researchers can play an important role as the “consciousness” of the social science community. Qualitative researchers can be critical philosophers of science and continue to challenge any arrogant claims to hegemony both in positivist and nonpositivist traditions.

Humility here does not mean weakness or minimizing the strength of the qualitative inquiry project. It does mean advocating for a social space where the various ways of knowing can coexist and flourish, thus contributing to a more pluralistic social science. In the same spirit, Lincoln and Denzin imagine a type of qualitative inquiry for the 21st century that is at the same time critical and vulnerable. This “critical vulnerability dares to use the particular and the personal as vehicles for criticizing the status quo” (p. 1054). The vulnerable scholarship they envision, “shows us how to act morally, in solidarity, with passion, with dignity”, and it “moves from the researcher’s biography to the biographies of others, to those rare moments when our lives connect” (p. 1053).

In promoting this humanistic vocation, we must also keep in mind, as Burman strongly reminds us, that qualitative research is not invulnerable to power abuses, as unethical case histories in medicine serve to illustrate. Hence, the need to keep ourselves aware of the potential “dark side” of the humanism that we associate with qualitative research. This means paying attention to power.

Recognize the role of power in the practice of research - Two facts make qualitative researchers more aware of what Burman calls the “intimate relations between knowledge and power”: one is the marginalized position that this mode of inquiry has had in the

distribution of power and privilege in academia. The other is the active role of critical theory in the field, which has contributed to heighten this awareness.

Indeed, the qualitative researcher is part of the “reform movement” that qualitative research is about and s/he can play her part in advancing its agenda. It means recognizing that power issues around legitimacy and hegemony get to be reproduced in general in academia, as well as inside its various communities of practice. What comes to mind for me, given my personal experience in the leadership project, is how easy it is to fall into the temptation of playing the game of “scientism” by trying to present the research in the light of good positivist science, when I believe the audience will judge me in those terms.

Our work is quite thoughtful and rigorous, but it does not fit a post-positivist understanding of qualitative research by any stretch of the imagination. One of the features of our design is that we do not have control over who are the leaders we work with. They come into the program and by virtue of being in the program they are invited to be co-researchers during the two-year cycle. But I find myself defending the extent to which these 60 award recipients are representative of a universe out there because the program has an excellent outreach and selection process.

Down deep, however, I am aware that this way of framing the issue is not appropriate. Rather than studying 60 cases, we are generating a phenomenological encounter that will produce a shared understanding of a particular experience. We want to learn from the uniqueness of each situation, and to try to generalize to the concept of leadership as an experience, rather than to the population of social change leaders. I feel quite comfortable with the goodness of this approach. I still get uncomfortable when I describe the details of our methodological choices to positivist and post-positivist colleagues.

I am aware of the danger of my discomfort. Burman warns us precisely of the practice of trying to do qualitative research that then is “sanitized” by using a positivist language, or by treating it as a variant of quantitative inquiry in the name of legitimacy. She identifies four ways in which we can fall into this trap, all of which she argues, represent inadequate but common rationales for doing or justifying doing qualitative research:

- First, proposing qualitative analysis as suitable for studies with small sample sizes. Here the rationale is that the sample is too small to merit statistical analysis. The problem is that this approach presupposes understanding qualitative research in quantitative terms. In qualitative research an N of 3 does not represent a sufficient reason to assume bad research. Rather, the standards are rigor and meaningfulness in relation to theoretical and practical questions.
- Second, using qualitative work as the pilot study. Here the rationale is that qualitative research is appropriate only as preparatory or exploratory inductive research, to be followed by more rigorous hypothetic-deductive inquiries. Again, Burman argues, this position maintains the scientific rhetoric of discovery, smuggling qualitative research as a variant of quantitative.
- A third rationale is arguing that qualitative research will allow the researcher to find more of the truth because it goes into places that quantitative instruments can't reach. This rationale however is problematic, Burman argues, because it ignores that qualitative research creates a different representation of the phenomenon at issue, not more of the "same" representation as quantitative research.
- Finally, Burman describes the rationale of "cozy complements". Here she argues that the liberal discourse that claims that there is space for mixing methods can result in removing the contested "edge" of qualitative research. It is important however, to maintain this edge, Burman argues, because it helps provide competitive as well as complementary interpretations that challenge positivist approaches, rather than simply adding to them.

Does this mean that there is no room for mixed methods? This again, depends on the broader position that one takes about the qualitative-quantitative divide. Not all qualitative researchers share Burman's opinion and the debate will probably continue to hunt the field. But even if one does not completely agree with her point of view, her position is a good reminder of the potential contribution of qualitative research to become the consciousness of social science, because of its critical posture against the myth of positivism. And this is something all qualitative researchers do share.

Burman argues that qualitative research is helpful precisely because it highlights the limits (and sometimes abuses) of positivist research. Precisely because of its contested nature, qualitative research presents alternative interpretations of the same phenomena and demonstrates that there are arenas that positivist research does not know or fails to recognize. In the case of her own discipline, Burman is happy to see qualitative research as a way to document important absences in psychology.

Another interesting area where qualitative researchers can acknowledge power is in the relationships they develop within the research practice. Strands of qualitative research such as feminist research, participatory action research and critical studies have contributed greatly to denounce power imbalances based on gender, race, ethnicity or other social identities and propose that research itself must be viewed as a tool of empowerment and emancipation. But even if one does not embrace this political ideology, one must recognize that issues of power are always present and the more they are addressed explicitly the better the research will be.

The relationship between researcher and researched is always framed within a power dynamic because it is mediated by the inequality of the research context, where most likely the researcher has what Schrijvers calls “defining-power” over the process and the products of the research. Obviously there are ethical issues associated with this discussion. Schrijvers argues that the researcher must be deliberate in establishing what she calls a “dialogical relation” to create a power balance. Among the ways she proposes to do this, especially when studying underprivileged communities, are: taking the view from below, creating mutual respect, yielding power and climbing down the privilege pedestal, sharing defining-power and accentuating the importance of immaterial exchanges (exchanges of different experiences, points of view and types of knowledge, for example).

Again, here there is a potential danger. Burman warns us about the opportunistic use of the language of empathy, authenticity and trust in research. She disagrees with the notion that qualitative research is by nature empowering. She warns that this language can become a patronizing or an insidious form of manipulation when the only goal is to build rapport, thus manipulating the research relationship. Hence, her claim that “the

fantasy of democratic research is belied by the basic issue of who gains (materially, symbolically) from the research”.

In our research with social change leaders who work with or come from vulnerable communities, this was an issue we faced from the very start. Let me briefly tell you the story of our first encounter. We worked very hard for a year to refine the design before the first group of award recipients entered the program. We were feeling very good about the democratic and participatory approach we chose to take. We entered the first program wide meeting with great expectations of starting to work with program participants immediately, and expecting to be welcome, given our approach. The first encounter was full of conflict, and the award recipients met our invitation with resistance and distrust. They were unhappy with the meeting format and with the research proposal: Why was the meeting so structured and when would they have time to just talk to each other? Why should they trust the motives of the foundation funding the program, the organization administering it, or the university involved in researching it? About the research, they asked: How would the results be used? Who would benefit from the research? Why were the strategies already chosen? Why should they trust an academy that they had experienced as opportunistic before? Who were we and what relationship did we have with social change?

By the second day of the meeting, the partners were asked to leave the room and the awardees caucused for about 2 hours. They organized a delegation to discuss their points of view with us and to suggest ways to address issues of concern. Based on the seriousness with which we listened and the way we responded, by the end of the meeting we were closer as a community, some respect and trust had started to develop and most awardees understood better the spirit of the proposed design. In latter conversations, it was clear that many of them were very aware of the power relations being played out, and they were not ready to just let anyone take them for granted. After all, these were effective social change leaders and they were living their leadership.

Given the trauma of the first encounter, and our aspirations of balanced power, for a while we withdrew and became very self-conscious of our “privilege” in front of this group. In reflecting upon this, we now realize that in wanting to give up our privilege as “experts from the ivory tower” we gave up our voice and our authority for a while, and

lost our right to be participants with equal footing in the common enterprise we had designed. We realized that this reaction could be equally threatening to the democratic aspirations we had for our research. We later realized that power is something that can flow in both directions, but so is respect, and that part of building trust in the research relationship meant not only respecting the others, but demanding respect for ourselves and what we could bring to the process. We have written a paper called “From Consent to Mutual Inquiry: Balancing Democracy and Authority in Action Research”, where we present our experience, punctuated with the voices of some awardees. This experience was a good reminder that the potential moral ground of qualitative research and its humanistic and democratic aspirations must be enacted daily and in the context of given power relations, rather than being assumed in abstract.

5. Coda

I have now addressed the three questions posed earlier. Given these reflections, I want to conclude by saying that in the context of social science and applied research, leading the way toward a deeper understanding of education and society may mean making a commitment to engage in research that is sound, credible, ethical and grounded in relevant questions for both theory and practice, but doing this from a humbled and engaged practice. Ultimately, leading the way means embracing the contradictions and the paradox of our qualitative research identity.

Indeed, this new field is full of diversity and contradiction. As Gergen and Gergen (2000) indicate in their description of the tensions and transformations of contemporary qualitative inquiry, “the field ...is replete with enthusiasm, creativity, intellectual ferment and action...There are cross-fertilizations, catalytic dialogues, and a prevailing sense of participation in a living revolution. Contrasting beliefs, skeptical challenges and resistance are also in evidence”. (p. 1025). To complicate this picture, not only is the field constantly transforming and effervescent, but the nature of the research work is equally characterized by great amounts of indeterminacy. Miles and Hubberman describe the daily workings of qualitative data analysis as follows:

“We believe that methodological quagmires, mazes and dead ends are not necessarily the products of researcher incapacity; rather, they stem from

qualitative data themselves. Like the phenomena they mirror, these data are usually complex and ambiguous and sometimes downright contradictory. Doing qualitative analysis means living for as long as possible with that complexity and ambiguity, coming to terms with it, and passing on our conclusions to the reader in a form that clarifies and deepens understanding” (p. 394).

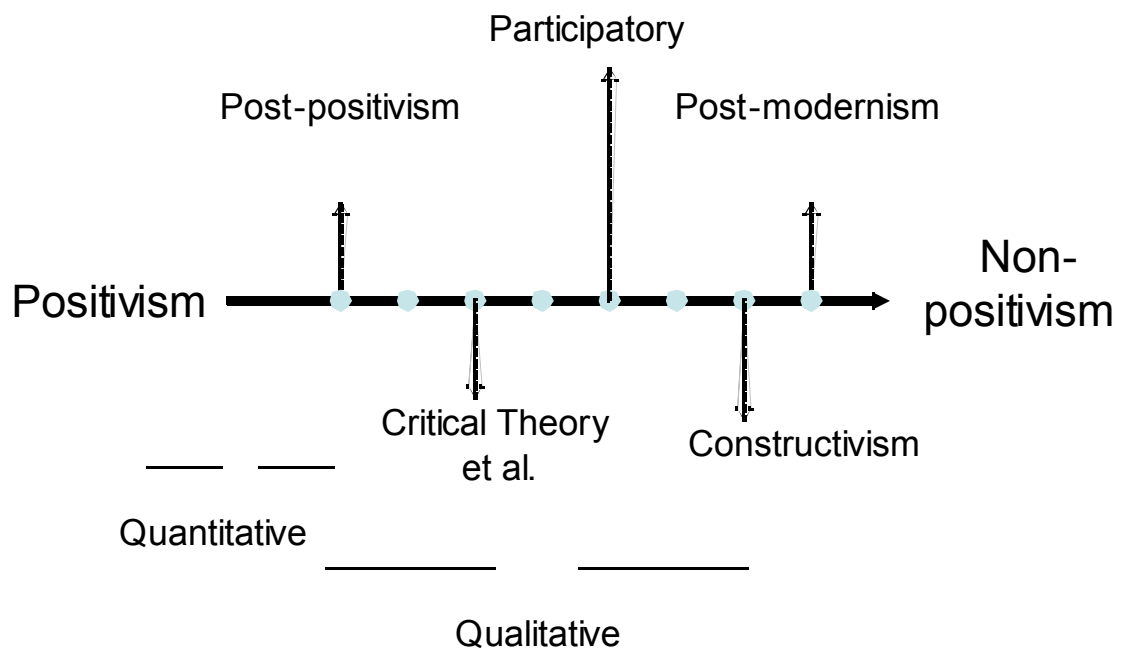
I have tried to provide here some suggestions on how to address such an unstable landscape and its dynamic practices, so that qualitative research can at least contribute to lead the way toward deeper understanding of society. In addressing you as qualitative researchers about to engage in three days of conversation, I would like to provide a final recommendation that comes from a place outside academia:

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the *questions themselves*...Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

The words are from the poet Rilke to one of his students, who was impatient about all that he wanted to learn and the slowness of the learning. I believe these words are equally appropriate for practitioners of qualitative research as we enter the 21st century. I offer them to you tonight as you prepare to further reflect on how qualitative research can lead the way toward deeper understanding of education and society.

Thank you.

Figure 1. Mapping Paradigms in the Continuum



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