

ARTICLES

TEACHING AGAINST THE TEXT: THE CASE OF QUALITATIVE METHODS*

Although all of us must teach against the text at times, I find myself doing this most often when teaching about qualitative methods in the context of a general introductory methods course. Myths about the nature and practice of qualitative research are both embedded in the folklore of mainstream sociology and supported by the textbooks that we use in our classrooms. However, many students resist instructors' attempts to question textbooks, which they regard as "gospel truth". How can we get our students to go beyond both textbook myths and mainstream folklore to grapple with misleading and inaccurate statements? In this article I suggest several strategies to raise awareness of myths about qualitative research, explain why several common statements about qualitative methods are myths, and suggest classroom strategies for engaging students in challenging these myths. I end with an evaluation of my own efforts to teach against the text in an undergraduate methods class.

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ANY OF US who teach textbook-based courses will sometimes find ourselves teaching against the text. Yet, hearing an instructor disagree with a text's author can be disconcerting to some students, opening the instructor to criticisms such as, "If you don't agree with the text, why did you choose it?" and "Are we supposed to know what you say or what the text says?" These kinds of objections come from students who believe that all textbooks contain untested knowledge. If it is in print, it must be right. For these students, textbook errors become the basis for what Paul and Elder (2001) refer to as "activated ignorance," actively using false information that they believe to be true. If their instructors not only raise questions about specific points in the text and but also expect students to enter

into the debate, students unused to critical thinking can become very uncomfortable. For students who are still unreflective thinkers (Elder 2000), challenging a textbook is blasphemous. Very likely, this discomfort arises from a moral dichotomy (Markowitz and Hedley 2001) that constructs textbooks as always accurate and labels anyone questioning this accuracy as a renegade.

Knowing that disagreeing with the textbook version of the "Truth" may lower our evaluations, perhaps some of us skirt this issue by not assigning controversial sections of a text or even by going along with a discussion about which we have another opinion. Another approach, however, is to use criticism of all of our textbooks as exercises in critical thinking. Textbooks are hard to write because they require expertise on a wide range of material that is almost always broader than the expertise of the author(s). For this reason, any textbook will contain at least some material that is clearly in error, such as the misuse of a percentage, an incorrect date on a citation, or the improper use of a term. In addition, any experienced sociologist will sometimes disagree with a text's author in areas where there is room

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for more than one interpretation. For example, answers to the questions, “What is ‘race’?” or “Does it ever make sense to use the term ‘gender role?’” vary depending upon the author’s point of view. Our students need to know not only that established scholars sometimes make very real mistakes just like the rest of us but also that there is room for disagreement on many points. A thinking person reads every text with a critical eye. An active reader continuously asks questions such as: “Why should I believe what is written here?”, “Is there another way of looking at this material?”, “Is there enough of the right kind of data to support the author’s point of view?”, and “Does this argument make sense?” Inviting our students to challenge their textbooks is an invitation to engage in critical thinking, a skill that some of our students lack. (For general ideas on teaching critical thinking, see articles by Richard Paul and Linda Elder [2002a, 2002b, 2003].)

The first step in challenging contested knowledge is to put it on the table for class discussion. When teaching the qualitative methods section of an introductory research methods class, I use a rather provocative true/false test to accomplish this task. (See Exhibit 1.) One could devise a similar test for contested knowledge on any topic. I distribute the test before I lecture on the material. After students have completed the test, I take a poll on how many of the 10 items they have marked “true.” In undergraduate courses, students typically mark five or more of the ten items true, whereas in graduate courses, the number is usually between three and five. After completing the poll, I then tell students that from my perspective all of the statements are either entirely or partially false. Yet, most of these statements are easily derivable from assumptions embedded in undergraduate methods textbooks. How can that be? Could textbooks lie?

In order to encourage students to move from “activated ignorance” that uncritically adopts these myths to “activated knowledge” that challenges and goes beyond the

Exhibit 1. A True-False Test on Qualitative Methods

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| 1. Participant observation is the field work method most commonly used by “qualitative sociologists.” | T F |
| 2. Content analysis is one of the most commonly used methods for analyzing qualitative data. | T F |
| 3. Qualitative data analysis involves looking for themes rather than variables. | T F |
| 4. One cannot generalize from small non-probability sample studies. | T F |
| 5. Another term for “convenience sample” is “haphazard sample.” | T F |
| 6. Ethnographic studies cannot be replicated. | T F |
| 7. Quantitative research falls within the positivist epistemological framework, whereas qualitative research is done by interpretive sociologists who reject positivist assumptions. | T F |
| 8. The methods used in qualitative research are entirely dependent upon the researcher and so are much too idiosyncratic to be called “methods.” | T F |
| 9. “Grounded theory” is a term used to refer to a research approach that allows one to collect data without having any design. | T F |
| 10. Ethnographic studies are more susceptible to subjective bias than are either experimental or survey research studies. | T F |

Number marked “True” _____

text (Paul and Elder 2001), we must do the same. This article outlines problems often found in qualitative methods chapters and invites methods instructors to use a discussion of these issues to build critical thinking skills in their introductory methods classes. The lesson underlying this exercise is that neither textbooks nor professors are always right. Students and teachers need to be on guard for contestable knowledge in text, lectures, and class discussion.

Although graduate students and honors

undergraduates are usually receptive to examining textbook myths, not all undergraduates are equally open to questioning either their textbooks or their instructors. How do undergraduates feel when instructors treat textbook knowledge as contestable? To answer this question, I administered a short questionnaire to my undergraduate methods students asking them how many of their other instructors had actively disagreed with the central text and how they felt about my doing so in the course that they had just finished. Because I think that their answers to these questions will be useful to anyone attempting to teach against a text, this article ends with a brief report on the results of this survey. Armed with this information, we will all be in a better position to shake our students loose from the assumption that “Text = Truth.”

TEN MYTHS ABOUT QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

At this point, I invite the reader to take the “ten myths” quiz. To what extent have you been misled by “qualitative methods” clichés embedded in the folklore of mainstream sociology and often supported by research methods textbooks? Usually written by “normal science” social scientists, these textbooks rarely cite the burgeoning body of qualitative methods writings produced by the “Qualitative Inquiry” (QI) movement. The QI articles and books published since 1980 have provided researchers with guidelines covering all aspects of qualitative research within a variety of traditions, including several brands of interpretivism, empiricism, and postmodernist interpretive ethnography (Schwandt 2000). The main, or perhaps the only, common denominator underlying this epistemological diversity is reliance upon data expressed in words rather than numbers. Otherwise, there are more differences among the many QI traditions than there are between qualitative and quantitative research

Although the QI literature does not speak “the truth about qualitative methods” with a

single voice, readers of books such as Maxwell’s *Qualitative Research Design* (1996) and Patton’s *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (1990) will find at least partial contradictions to the statements in Exhibit 1. Not all teachers of undergraduate methods courses can be expected to read the voluminous QI literature. This article, therefore, offers some shortcuts by addressing common misconceptions about qualitative research, directing the reader to QI and other resources useful for refuting each of the ten statements, and suggesting classroom strategies for discussing each issue.

1. Participant Observation (PO) Is the Field Work Method Most Commonly Used by Qualitative Sociologists

Response. If you answered “true” to the above item, the fieldwork chapter in your undergraduate textbook probably had an outline something like this:

1. Topics appropriate for field research
2. Brief history of field research and discussion of Chicago School
3. Participant observer roles
4. Field relations/entry to the field
5. Sampling
6. Taking field notes and interviewing
7. Data processing and analysis (might have included use of computer programs)
8. Illustrations using very fine participant observation studies such as Liebow’s *Tally’s Corner* (1967) or Diamond’s *Making Gray Gold* (1992)
9. A discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of field research usually focusing on the subjectivity of the method and the lack of any generalizability.

Some of the most recent textbook editions, however, have begun to cover a wider range of fieldwork methods. Recent editions of methods textbooks have increased their coverage of qualitative methods and now do a better job than they once did of representing the diversity of qualitative approaches. However, to the extent that observational studies are the central focus of

most textbook chapters on qualitative methods, students are still likely to come away from the textbook with the impression that qualitative research in social science is equivalent to participant observation.

Teaching strategies. I start the discussion of this issue by asking the students what kinds of studies they think of when they think of “field research.” How do they think their textbook author would answer the question?

If your students do equate qualitative sociology with participant observation, where did they get that idea? What lectures or readings in other classes suggested to them that participant observation was the most common method used in qualitative sociology? After they answer these questions, invite your students to test that hypothesis. If you are online in the classroom, you can then do a quick test of the hypothesis that “Field research in sociology consists primarily of participant observation studies” by doing relevant searches on your institution’s electronic data bases such as First Search, ProQuest, or EBSCO’s Academic Search Elite. Other alternatives are to assign the exercise as homework and discuss it in class the next day or to simply present the results of your own search (or mine) as lecture material.

Hypothesis test. To test the hypothesis that participant observation is the method of choice for contemporary qualitative sociologists, I conducted a search of the Sociological Abstracts database for all records (including dissertations and conference papers) for 1996-2002. A search on “observation AND participation,” as keywords in the abstract field, yielded 1042 records. Asking for records that contained “observation AND participation but NOT interview,” resulted in 848 cases of “pure participant observation,” and asking for “grounded theory” produced just 537 records, some of which were also included in the participant observation category. When I asked for all records described by “interview NOT survey,” I got a whopping 5079 items! Although participant observa-

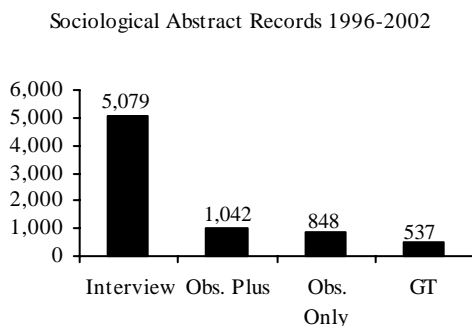
tion clearly outranks grounded theory in the Sociological Abstracts data base, interview studies done outside the context of survey research outnumber purely observational studies six to one. (See Exhibit 2.)

Of course, this quick and dirty empirical test leaves out books, and PO studies may be more likely to result in books than in articles. If so, a literature search that excludes books in favor of journal articles may underestimate the actual number of PO studies relative to small-sample interview studies. Because the kind of field work that results in books such as *Tally’s Corner* (Liebow 1967) or *Making Gray Gold* (Diamond 1992) requires years of labor intensive work, however, small sample interview studies will always outnumber major field studies.

It is therefore safe to say that the impression of qualitative research that one would get from reading most undergraduate textbooks is misleading. The evidence presented suggests that the modal type of design used by qualitative sociologists is the small-sample interview study! Despite textbooks’ emphasis on the vagaries of participant observation, small sample interview studies using some kind of purposive sampling are far more common in the social sciences than are participant observation studies.

Discussion questions. After testing this hypothesis, I usually entertain a discussion about why there is such a discrepancy be-

Exhibit 2: Participant Observation Versus Interview Studies in Sociological Abstracts: 1996-2002



tween the image of qualitative research gleaned from the textbook and the data that they have just looked at. Do textbook authors actually believe that PO studies are the modal category of qualitative studies? Or, are these studies just so intrinsically interesting that textbook authors use them to engage students in the material? Perhaps we are looking at an established textbook tradition of using participant observation as the modal type of qualitative research. The tradition may be so well established that new textbook authors simply follow it without question. How could we find out? What kind of a study would we have to do in order to answer that question?

2. Content Analysis Is One of the Most Commonly Used Methods for Analyzing Qualitative Data

Response. On this topic, undergraduate textbooks are correct, but their discussions of content analysis seem to have little effect on their readers. Here we are dealing with research methods folklore rather than a textbook-induced mythology. All too often I hear students describe qualitative data analysis as “content analysis.” Qualitative data analysis does involve attaching “themes” to sections of text and coming up with some decision rules for doing so, but this is not what methodologists normally mean when they refer to “content analysis” (Neuman 2000: 293). The latter, sometimes called “classical content analysis” (Ryan and Bernard 2000:785), involves taking a random sample of text segments and developing a coding system that allows a quantitative analysis of the results. For example, had I wanted to base this article on a content analysis, I might have selected a random sample of undergraduate methods textbooks and then coded the qualitative methods chapters for such variables as “percent of chapter devoted to participant observation,” or “mention of grounded theory.”

In contrast, qualitative data analysis does not turn codes into numbers. Codes remain in the analysis as concepts that can be related to others, and, if we want, even

counted for frequency, but not manipulated statistically. Classical content analysis is a quantitative method than can be used for hypothesis testing. Qualitative analysis of text as in discourse or narrative analysis bears little resemblance to classical content analysis, as these traditions focus not upon counting but rather upon in-depth analyses of meaning and symbols.

Teaching strategies. Ask students to find examples of classical and ethnographic content analysis in the literature and bring them into class for discussion. Bring one page of line-numbered, double-spaced text to class and put it on an overhead. Divide the class into two kinds of task groups and have the “A” groups code using classical content analysis guidelines while the “B” groups do ethnographic coding. Then have each set of groups report on their findings and discuss the differences between the two. Why do so many students refer to qualitative data analysis as “content analysis”? How is qualitative data analysis the same and/or different from classical content analysis?

3. Qualitative Data Analysis Involves Looking for Themes Rather than Variables

Response. In his discussion of conceptualization in quantitative vs. qualitative research, Neuman (2000: 123) describes concepts in quantitative research as variables in contrast to the “themes” found in qualitative data analysis. This statement is another partial truth. A theme can usually become a variable, and some variables are themes. A theme is a meaning underlying a piece of text or dialogue. A variable, of course, is simply any quality that can vary. Since all themes can be either present or absent, any theme can be thought of as a “variable.” Themes become “variables” in qualitative analysis when the researcher relates them to other variables in statements such as “Working class women returned to work much sooner after childbirth than did middle-class women.” or “Co-provider wives expected more housework help from their husbands than did secondary provider wives” (Hood 1983:124-7). Obviously a

theme cannot be a variable when it is a constant! If all of our cases share a characteristic, that characteristic can be a theme but not a variable in our study. For example, in my work on children of U.S. Communists, I have so far found that all of these adult children share a “meta-ethic” that requires them to always speak out in the face of injustice. Although “choosing to speak out against injustice” is a theme that runs through my data, it is not a variable because all of my respondents have this trait.

Discussion questions. Why do textbook authors so often suggest that qualitative studies do not have “variables”? What kinds of qualitative studies are least likely to have “variables”? How different do you think qualitative research is from quantitative research? How important is that distinction to the author of your textbook? How important is it to you?

4. One Cannot Generalize from Small Non-Probability Sample Studies

Response. This statement is common in the textbooks I have reviewed (Babbie 2001:182; Neuman 2000:204) and is more a point of view than a myth. The above statement would be true if we rephrased it: “We cannot generalize from non-probability samples in the same way that we can from random samples.” Discussions of sampling in methods textbooks typically begin with a paragraph or two about the distinction between probability and nonprobability sampling. Probability sampling is the standard against which all other kinds of sampling are measured. Thus, most textbook discussions of nonprobability samples point out that such samples are non-representative, do not allow the researcher to assess sampling bias, and do not permit generalization to the population from which the sample was taken (Babbie 2001; Maisel and Hodges Persell 1996; Neuman 1997). Nonprobability samples, some textbook authors argue, should be used only when it is impossible to take a random sample or when one is doing a preliminary, exploratory study. For example, Neuman writes:

Sampling based on probability theory lets a researcher say precise things about sampling and use powerful statistics. Samples that are not based upon probability theory are more limited. A researcher uses them out of ignorance, because of lack of time, or in special situations. Except for special situations, quantitative researchers prefer probability samples. (P. 204)

In stark contrast to the above standard criticism of nonprobability samples, the authors of qualitative methods books argue that the logic of purposive sampling is different from that of random sampling and that purposive samples must be evaluated on their own terms (Maxwell 1996; Miles and Huberman 1994; Patton 1990). As Patton points out, “small purposive samples are far too often judged on the basis of the logic, purpose, and recommended sample sizes of probability sampling” (p. 185).

Schutt (2006:21) offers one of the best textbook discussions of generalizing from nonprobability samples. Drawing from Cook and Campbell’s (1979) distinction between sample and cross-population generalizability, Schutt explains that one can generalize from case studies and clearly defined, purposive samples by extending one’s conclusion to cases or populations similar to the ones studied. Glaser and Strauss (1965) describe this chain of reasoning as “the discounting process.” We select the situations to which we can generalize by “discounting” comparisons to unlike situations. For example, we could generalize Stack’s (1975) findings about “The Flats” to other kin-based, poor, urban, midwestern, African-American communities in the late 1960s. We might even be able to extend her findings to poor white kin-based communities in urban areas during the same period. It would be a mistake, however, to expect the same findings either in a non-kin-based community or after Clinton’s 1996 welfare reform. Cross-population generalizability relies upon detailed knowledge of the case or population studied, allowing the researcher and the reader to decide which characteristics other cases must share before

generalizations can be made.

Unlike sample generalizability that depends upon the laws of probability and is the same under the same conditions, cross-population generalizability is “theoretical” and “purposive,” requiring judgment from both the researcher and the reader. Consequently, there will be room for disagreement as to whether or not any given conclusion may be generalized to a specific population. Rather than continue to criticize non-probability samples for not being random samples, methods teachers and textbook authors would do better to fully explain the difference between the logics of each kind of sample and the kinds of generalizability afforded by each logic.

Discussion questions. Given the clear differences between sample and cross-population generalizability, why do so many undergraduate textbooks ignore that difference? Can you guess the epistemological stance of an author who insists that one cannot generalize in any way from a case study? What about the stance of an author who insists upon the opposite point of view? Why do so few general textbook authors cite either Cook and Campbell (1979) or the Qualitative Inquiry literature that discusses the notion of cross-population generalizability?

5. Another Term for “Convenience Sample” Is “Haphazard Sample”

Response. The following critique is a summary of my own unpublished work on this topic (Hood 2003). The confounding of the term “convenience” with “haphazard” or sometimes even “purposive” samples is commonplace. This confusion goes back at least as far as Chein’s 1976 discussion of sampling and has become both a textbook legend and a source of activated ignorance.

The term “convenience sample” means only that the sampling frame was selected in part on the basis of availability. In fact, convenience samples are never chosen only because they are convenient. They are also chosen purposefully to fulfill specific criteria. If we want to pretest a survey of regis-

tered nurses, we do not use our Sociology class but instead look for a class of nursing students. When evaluating a given convenience sample, we need to know about the following things: the sampling frame, the response rate, and, ideally, how the demographics of the achieved sample compare to those of the target population. When we know all of these things, we can make judgments about the advisability of generalizing to the target population from the sample studied. Simply knowing that the sample was a “convenience” sample tells us very little. After all, sampling frames for random samples are also selected on the basis of availability or convenience. Do you know of a survey sample that relied upon an *unavailable* sampling frame?

Convenience samples may be either purposive or haphazard but not both. However, many textbook authors equate convenience or availability sampling with haphazard or “street corner” samples. For example, when speaking of availability samples, Babbie writes: “Relying on available subjects such as stopping people at a street corner or some other location is an extremely risky sampling method: even so, it’s used all too frequently” (2001:179).

Purposive or judgmental samples are the opposite of haphazardly chosen ones. Choosing a purposive sample with known characteristics from a known population allows us to make cross-population generalizations, whereas choosing a haphazard sample does not. In addition, purposive samples are often not at all convenient. Researchers who want to study a small number of cases of a highly specific sort (e.g. gay fathers who have sole custody of their children) must work hard to find these cases. It is considerably easier to find a convenience sample for pre-testing a survey than it is to find some kinds of purposive samples for ethnographic interview studies. Therefore, in spite of the common misuse of the word “convenience” for all non-probability samples, it would be best to talk about different kinds of purposive samples that enjoy varying degrees of convenience.

Teaching strategies. If the distinctions I have made in this discussion seem obvious to you and are also obvious to your students, then I suggest inviting a discussion of how the confounding of convenience with haphazard sampling has managed to persist for so long. Do textbook authors suspend critical thinking when quoting from well-known and widely accepted textbooks?

6. Ethnographic Studies Cannot Be Replicated

Response. Like Myth 4, this one is also more a point of view than a myth. Certainly conventional wisdom tells us that the above statement is true, and most textbooks say that replication is a problem for case studies. However replication is always a matter of degree. The question is not “Can I replicate this study?” but rather, “How well can I replicate this study?” A study is not replicable unless the original researchers have precisely and completely described their research process. Replication is easier in survey research and lab experiments because researchers typically describe the design, instrument, and setting. When qualitative researchers take care to describe their process in detail by referring to a running record of their research decisions (Maxwell 1996), their work can be replicated. Of course, since the researcher is the instrument, a different researcher may not “see” the same things that the original one did (see Buford May and Patillo-McCoy 2000). However, if the original researcher describes her observations and decision rules clearly enough, anyone attempting a replication should be able to decide whether or not the same phenomena are present in the new setting. Given no guidelines, different observers will always pick out different things from a complex setting, but given explicit guidelines about what to look for, researchers will be more likely to develop a degree of “inter-observer reliability.”

Yes, ethnographic interviews and participant observation do produce non-standardized research records, but to the extent that the process has been recorded,

these kinds of studies can and should be replicated. A student researcher did an undergraduate honors thesis (Duchowny 1996) on taggers, interviewing and hanging out with local taggers for several months. After she wrote her thesis, she discovered a recently published ethnography of Denver taggers (Ferrell and Stewart-Huidobro 1993). To her initial dismay, she found that the other authors’ conclusions were similar to her own. When I pointed out that she and the other authors had just replicated each other’s work, thus giving more credence to both sets of conclusions, the student realized that her own work had been validated rather than undermined. Although we must always apply the “discounting logic” to similar studies done by different researchers, we can learn a great deal by comparing and contrasting case studies of similar phenomena.

Thinking of replicability as a continuum rather than as a dichotomy forces us to consider the aspects of research design and practice that make a study more or less replicable. And this kind of thinking is probably more valuable than the “field-studies-are-not-replicable” cliché.

Discussion questions and exercises. How important is replicability in social science? What conditions must be met before a study is replicable? Why do positivist social scientists emphasize replicability more than do interpretivist social scientists? Find an example of an ethnographic case study. Write a three-to-five-paged paper explaining how you would go about replicating that study. What challenges would you face?

7. Quantitative Research Falls within the Positivist Epistemological Framework, Whereas Qualitative Research Is Done by Interpretive Sociologists Who Reject Positivist Assumptions

Response. Since most undergraduate methods books do not spend much time discussing epistemology, they often do not provide the basis for understanding the distinctions among positivism, interpretivism, and constructionism. A major exception to

this rule is Neuman's (2000) chapter, "The Meanings of Methodology," which compares and contrasts positivism, interpretivism, and critical social science.

I find the above true/false statement to be just partly true. Although researchers working within the interpretivist epistemological framework very often do use qualitative methods, interpretivist assumptions do not *necessitate* the use of qualitative data analysis any more than positivist assumptions require the use of numbers.

Both positivists and post-positivists assume intersubjectivity and want to build a cumulative body of knowledge based upon hypothesis testing using precise measures. Positivist social scientists want to be able to predict and control social phenomena. In contrast, interpretivists place less emphasis on prediction and control and more on understanding how people make sense of their worlds. Rather than assuming that we all experience the same events in the same way, interpretivists think that people filter all experience through their own subjectivities. However, in spite of the many differences between "positivists" and "interpretivists" as ideal types, some interpretivists share the positivist values of attempting to make their research replicable by spelling out their methods in precise detail. Similarly, many interpretivists value rigorous definitions of key concepts and a close match between theory and data. The grounded theory tradition is an example of one of the more "positivist" approaches to qualitative research done in the interpretivist tradition, and, as the reader may guess, I am an example of this kind of "positivist-interpretivist."

Instructors should discourage students from over-identifying "qualitative" research with a single epistemology. We must instead teach students to make the myriad distinctions among interpretivist, phenomenological, and constructivist qualitative inquirers (Schwandt 2000), even though most researchers will not fit neatly into the categories of any given typology.

Exercise and discussion questions. To

encourage students to work with epistemological assumptions, I assign two example studies (Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade* [1970] and South and Spitze's [1994] survey on household types and division of labor included as Appendix D in Schutt's text [2001]). I then ask students to write an essay comparing and contrasting the two studies with regard to both method and epistemology. Questions include: Is Humphreys an interpretivist or a positivist or both? In what ways? What about South and Spitze? How would you classify your textbook author? Your instructor? Yourself? To what extent do epistemological assumptions drive the kinds of methods we choose? If an interpretivist were ever to do an experiment, what kind would he do? If a positivist were to do a participant observation study, how might she do it? What kind of social scientist are you?

8. The Methods Used in Qualitative Research Are Entirely Dependent upon the Researcher and So Are Much Too Idiosyncratic To Be Called "Methods"

Response. As the reader may suspect, this statement is a "tongue in cheek" paraphrase of the "qualitative methods are no methods" point of view sometimes espoused by normal science sociologists. Although you will not find such a statement in any textbook, you will learn that in fieldwork the researcher *is* the instrument (Neuman 2000:355) and that in inductive studies, the design develops as the study progresses. For participant observation in particular, this statement is true. However, the above statement *does not* mean that the researcher is *the method*. Perhaps the safest generalization one can make about "qualitative research" is that all of it involves data that are best analyzed as words and categories rather than numbers. Most words can be turned into numbers (as we do in survey research) and numbers can be turned into words (as we do when we trichotomize an index into "High," "Medium," and "Low," so that we can use it as a variable in a cross tabulation.)

Beyond the words vs. numbers distinction, one must look at the tradition within which the research is being done. Is the researcher doing true ethnography, or is she working within the traditions of phenomenology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, ethnographic content analysis, institutional ethnography, the extended case method, or maybe ethnomethodology? Research approaches that result in qualitative data analysis vary widely. (Creswell 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 2000a; Schwandt 2000; Tesch 1990).

A thorough discussion of each of these qualitative traditions is both beyond the scope of this article and unnecessary, as each method is well described in the sources cited above. These methods vary in the extent to which procedures are codified and can be arrayed along the full range of the "Positivist-----Constructivist" continuum. For example, some ethnographers writing in the Chicago School tradition such as Humphreys in *Tearoom Trade* (1970) or Miller in *Street Woman* (1986) carefully document their research process and discuss exceptions to their generalizations. These authors are concerned about reliability and validity in qualitative research. "Radical social constructionists," such as Norman Denzin (1997), reject altogether the idea that one can accurately represent the external world. In between these two poles, we have scholars such as Dorothy Smith (1990) who argue that "the problem is not whether the world can be described and investigated, but how" (p. 90). Smith combines the positivist notion of a describable external world with the interpretivist assumption that the perspective of the knower affects what can be known.

Qualitative researchers do use systematic methods, but their systems may develop along with their studies, and QI traditions vary in the importance they assign to documenting methods completely and precisely.

Discussion strategies. A discussion of this myth may be most appropriate for honors undergraduates or graduate students, but some discussion of epistemology is appro-

priate for any introductory social science class. The exercise described for Myth 7 works well to get students thinking about competing paradigms in sociology. In class, I discuss the meanings of words such as "method," "logical," "empirical," or "scientific," and how the answers to those questions vary depending upon one's epistemological assumptions (Neuman 2000). However, to enter into this discussion, one must first discuss epistemology.

To set the tone for a discussion of epistemology, I offer examples of how some of my state's folk cultures define "truth" and "wisdom," and how those definitions differ from normal science's concepts of "validity" and "reliability." For example, several years ago, a Native American student brought a stack of note cards to a classroom debate on the effects of divorce on children. However, when it was her turn to speak, Alice did not use any of the citations or facts on her note cards and instead spoke extemporaneously about her own experience with divorce in her extended family and among the people she knew in her pueblo. When asked later why she had not shared her research with us, this student said that since she was an elder and had had a lot of experience, she did not need to rely on books. In Alice's culture, books were considered an inferior source of evidence when compared to personal wisdom accumulated over one's lifetime. After presenting this example to the class, I then point out that underlying every "philosophy of knowing" is a set of values that cannot be proven either right or wrong but must simply be taken on faith. In my classroom, the assumptions of normal science are always on the table for discussion. However, in many textbooks, these assumptions are embedded in the text and absorbed as uncontested knowledge. These assumptions are the basis for the following riddle that I ask in class each semester:

Q: If an interpretivist calls himself an interpretivist and a critical social scientist calls herself a critical social scientist, what does a positivist call himself?

A: A scientist!

9. “Grounded Theory” Is a Term Used to Refer to a Research Approach That Allows One to Collect Data Without Having Any Design

Response. People answering “yes” to this question may be more influenced by popular meanings of the term “grounded theory” than by the original tenets of grounded theory described in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Although many researchers use the term to describe any analysis deriving theory from data, the formal definition of grounded theory is much more specific. The defining characteristics of grounded theory are:

- Data collection proceeds in a hermeneutic spiral involving cycles of data collection, coding, analysis, writing, design, data collection.
- Researchers engage in constant comparative analysis of cases throughout each cycle, comparing cases to theoretical categories.
- Data collection follows a theoretical sampling frame that develops from initial data analyses.
- The size of the sample is determined by the “saturation” of categories rather than population size.
- Theory is developed inductively from data rather than tested by data.
- Codes “emerge” from data and are not imposed a priori upon it.
- The substantive theory outlined in the final report takes into account all the variations in the data and conditions associated with these variations.
- The final report is an analytical product rather than a purely descriptive account.

Although Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) description of grounded theory differs from Glaser and Strauss’s original conception (Charmaz 2000, 2003, 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967), grounded theory by either definition involves a set of well-defined procedures. Babbie aptly describes grounded theory as attempting “to combine a naturalist approach with a positivist concern for a ‘systematic set of procedures’ in

doing qualitative research” (2001:284).

Students who understand the difference between inductive and deductive research designs and who have followed my discussion of the hermeneutic spiral understand grounded theory’s goal of building theory from data. However, neither textbook authors nor most purported users of grounded theory really understand theoretical sampling. Because I consider theoretical sampling to be a defining trait of grounded theory and am writing on the topic, I spend some time teaching about this distinction. For others, the definition of “theoretical sample” will be a fine point better left to a graduate seminar. For readers who want to deal with the difference between purposive samples in general and theoretical samples in particular, I offer a brief discussion below.

Theoretical sampling. A quick check of the Sociological Abstracts journal article data base finds 599 abstracts containing the term “grounded theory,” but only 74 (12.4%) that contain both “grounded theory” and “theoretical sample” or “theoretical sampling.” Even when researchers say that they are using theoretical sampling, they may not be doing so. The distinction between the two types of sampling is elusive as the following example illustrates.

Although theoretical sampling is a type of purposive sampling, it is different from most other kinds of purposive sampling because the theoretical categories that guide the sampling are the result of the previous stages of analysis and are analytical rather than simply demographic categories. For example, a researcher who wanted to study single parents and looked for ten single parent fathers and ten single parent mothers would be doing purposive sampling. Suppose, however, that in the course of analyzing his first several interviews, this researcher discovered that the quality of the co-parenting relationship with the ex-spouse seemed to affect just about everything else he was looking at. He might then begin to *theoretically sample* on quality of co-

parenting relationships by looking for people who varied on that dimension. He then would keep sampling good and bad co-parenting relationships until he had fully elaborated the concepts of “good” and “bad” co-parenting relationships. What makes a relationship good or bad? What contingencies affect the quality of these relationships? At that point, grounded theorists would say that the researcher had “saturated” the category of “quality of co-parenting relationship” and could stop theoretical sampling.

To their credit, both Schutt (2001) and Babbie (2001) discuss theoretical sampling in recent editions of their texts. Unfortunately, however, each author blurs the distinction between theoretical sampling and other kinds of purposive sampling. For a good example of theoretical sampling, see Glaser and Strauss’ discussion of “awareness contexts” in *Awareness of Dying* (1965:9-11). In undergraduate courses, I simply ask students to omit that part of the chapter and tell them that a full discussion of theoretical sampling is beyond the scope of an undergraduate methods class. In a course devoted to qualitative methods only or a graduate seminar on methods, it is more important to make the distinction between purposive sampling in general and theoretical sampling which is a very specific kind of purposive sampling guided by categories that emerge during data gathering.

To be fair to those who circled “true” for this item, the term “grounded theory” has been used so loosely in the literature that its popular meaning may now be “any study that does not use statistics.” However, this usage bears no resemblance to either Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) or Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) version of grounded theory. Given that the very accomplished authors of two of the leading undergraduate methods texts each misunderstood theoretical sampling, it would be surprising to find very many social scientists who truly understood the procedure as originally described by Glaser and Strauss.

Grounded theory requires a design, but

that design develops in response to each stage of data analysis as a result of clearly defined procedures. Because grounded theorists must describe these procedures in detail and because all theory must be clearly derived from the data on which it is based, grounded theory shares some aspects of both positivism and empiricism. (For an excellent discussion of grounded theory see Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* [2006].)

Of course, not all qualitative researchers are concerned with verification and replicability. Some researchers working in the post-positivist tradition feel that there is no place for validity and reliability in qualitative research. In the introduction to the second edition of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Denzin and Lincoln (2000b) discuss the “crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis” in the wake of post-structuralism (p. 17). If nothing can be known except from the perspective of the knower, then what are reliability and validity? Researchers working in post-structuralist traditions are less likely to be concerned about either design or verification and more apt to focus on meanings embedded in text or “lived experience.”

Teaching strategies. To encourage graduate students to explore the differences among different qualitative traditions, I ask them to find articles that represent at least two contrasting qualitative traditions and then to bring these articles in for class discussion. Where do they stand on the “crisis of representation”? To what qualitative inquiry tradition do they belong? In a discussion of grounded theory, I ask students to offer examples of theoretical samples as well as examples of purposive samples that are not theoretical samples. What implications does this difference have for the way in which theory is built from data? For undergraduates, I encourage a discussion of how it could have happened that so many people claiming to use a certain method are really doing nothing of the sort? How did the term “grounded theory” lose its original meaning? And does it even matter? What

did Marx mean when he said “God save me from the Marxists?” Might Glaser say the same thing himself today about the “grounded theorists”?

10. *Ethnographic Studies Are More Susceptible to Subjective Bias than Are Either Experimental or Survey Research Studies*

Response. This notion is both suggested by some textbooks and embedded in our discipline’s folk culture. Words are assumed to be less precise than are numbers (Neuman 2000), and interpretations of qualitative data are assumed to be more subjective than are interpretations of quantitative data. I begin my discussion of this topic by suggesting that whereas positivists often assume that they have no biases, interpretivists and constructivists control their biases by making them explicit. Feminist interpretivists (cf. Naples 2003) include biographical statements in their introductions explaining how and why they have chosen their topics. Having laid bare their biases, interpretivists usually attempt to set these biases aside in order to be as open as possible to what they are observing. When the researcher puts her biases on the table for discussion, readers can take them into consideration when evaluating her conclusions. However, if a survey researcher thinks that her methods somehow make her impervious to subjective bias, she can easily build bias into her design without being aware of it.

Subjectivity enters into both quantitative and qualitative research designs but it does so in different ways at different points in the research process. To some extent, personal values will drive the choice of research questions and topics. Those working deductively from a body of literature will be limited by the biases embedded in that literature, whereas those working inductively from data will be influenced by both personal experience and the knowledge that they bring to the topic. For both experiments and surveys, bias creeps into the gap between nominal and operational definitions. Can one measure aggressiveness by

the number of times a toddler hits a bobo doll? Does the number of times one can say “Betty baked a box of buttered biscuits” actually have anything to do with one’s verbal ability in the more general sense (Kimura 1992)? Assumptions about the relationship between operational and nominal definitions are the Achilles heels of surveys and experiments. In surveys, bias can affect both the wording of questions and question order, and both of these may affect results (Schuman and Presser 1996). In fact, survey design can be so easily manipulated by researchers who understand its principles that a skilled researcher could produce a variety of results at will. Unfortunately, however, most biases embedded in survey research and experiments are not the result of conscious manipulation by experts. Such systematic errors would be easier to detect and correct. Instead, implicit assumptions and undetected mistakes find their way into our instruments affecting our results in ways that we may never know.

In qualitative research, biases affect both our choice of topic and what we record, but once we have our field notes, we can limit bias in reporting by taking into account all of the data pertaining to a given topic when we write up our results. Field workers who discuss prevalence of patterns and exceptions and who summarize observations in matrices or graphs are less likely to ignore data that do not fit their preconceptions. Thus, the gap between concepts (or measures) and data is likely to be much smaller in good qualitative research than it is in self-administered surveys. Nonetheless, texts often question the validity of observational data (see Schutt 2001:302). Babbie, however, recognizes that ethnographic fieldwork is likely to result in high measurement validity but no statistical generalizability (2001:301).

Discussion questions and exercises. What is bias in social science research? Does your textbook author have any biases? If so, what are they? Do you have any biases about social research? How can you uncover a researcher’s biases? What is the most likely

source of bias in an experiment, a survey, or a participant observation study? Pick two contrasting studies and compare and contrast biases embedded in each research report.

CLASS SURVEY ON TEACHING AGAINST THE TEXT

Although I knew from experience that students objected to my teaching against the text, and although I had been devising methods to counter their resistance, I did not really understand the source of their discomfort. In April 2004, therefore, I conducted a brief survey of students' attitudes about my habit of raising questions about the text. Shortly thereafter, I discovered Perry's (1999) research on the intellectual development of Harvard students in the 1950s and 60s. Both the results of my survey and Perry's work support the conclusion that one must gently lead students toward critical thinking while explaining why one is taking them there. Knowing more about the nature of our students' discomfort may help us make their intellectual journey more enjoyable as well as more fruitful.

Survey Results

My half-paged survey asked students: 1) whether any of their other instructors had actively disagreed with the textbook, 2) if so, how many had disagreed, 3) whether or not they wished that their instructor had agreed with the text and why, 4) what they wanted instructors to do when/if the text really had a mistake in it, and 5) what grade they expected to earn in the course.

Fifty-two students from two sections of my undergraduate methods class responded to the survey. Even though students in this course are typically second semester juniors, only two thirds of the students reported having had an instructor criticize the text, and a little over half the students admitted that they wished I had agreed with the textbook. The remaining students either did not care whether or not I disagreed or actually found my disagreements instructive.

Students who objected to a critical examination of the text explained that they found it confusing when the text and the professor disagreed and that they did not know what to study for the test. For example:

It was hard to know exactly what to study and believe. I never thought textbooks had the wrong information, and I was skeptical to believe so.

Because it is hard to know what side we should know for the test since we are given two sides. Way too much work and unnecessary opinions.

Used to thinking of the text as correct, these students thought of the instructor's critiques as "unnecessary" and distracting information. Some students, however, actually embraced critical examination of the text. These students said such things as:

Some of the material covered may not have been explained or addressed correctly. Having a real-human explanation or interpretation is very helpful in understanding the material.

I like to be able to critically read a text and compare my own disagreements with those of my instructor.

...I think teachers should be more opinionated and share how they feel about issues that the text offers.

Cross tabulations showed that 65 percent of students whose other instructors had criticized the text were tolerant of my doing so, whereas just 24 percent of those unexposed to text criticism exhibited such tolerance (Gamma: .7; $p < .002$). The grade expected in the class had no relationship to either students' attitudes toward text criticism or their prior experience of it. However, 82 percent of the students expecting a B or better in the course preferred that I correct a textbook mistake in class rather than "not making them learn it" as opposed to 42 percent of those expecting less than a B (Gamma: .7; $p < .001$). Students who wanted to make sure that mistakes were

corrected expected better grades than those who did not want either their own thinking or the textbook challenged.

Perry's Stages of Intellectual Development

However enlightening these results were, I did not really understand my findings until I stumbled upon Perry's (1999) 1950s and '60s studies of Harvard undergraduates. Perry's surveys of his own students led to a four-step model of undergraduates' intellectual development. The model starts with the *simple dualism* stage in which all questions have right answers, and progresses through the *complex dualism* stage at which students recognize that questions may have several possible answers. However, at this stage students have difficulty choosing among these answers. Eventually undergraduates move from dualism to *complex relativism* and finally to *commitment in relativism*. When they reach this point, students realize that not all perspectives are equally valid and that arguments need to be supported to have validity. Ultimately, by the time they enter graduate school, students should be able to view problems from competing points of view and develop perspectives of their own.

In 2004-2005, most of my New Mexico juniors were in the simple or complex dualism stages that Perry (1999) found to be typical of Harvard first-year students in the 1950s. A few had moved to "complex relativism" and perhaps one or two were able to entertain competing paradigms. Like Perry's first-year undergraduates, my students were uncomfortable with the very notion of criticizing the text because the idea was foreign to them. Their minds rebelled at the very notion that the text could be wrong or that there is more than one way of looking at something. As this article goes to press, I am once more revising my approach to teaching against the text. This term, I am following Perry's advice by leading my students in steps toward the critical enterprise rather than expecting them to embrace this endeavor all at once.

CONCLUSION

This article is an invitation to think critically about commonly made statements pertaining to qualitative research. Some of these statements are textbook myths, and others are simply contestable knowledge. To encourage my students to think critically about these kinds of statements, I often use a true/false test of the sort exemplified in this article. After deciding that several statements are true, students learn that all statements on the test are at least contestable. The exercise then becomes an invitation to think critically about textbooks and to question widely-accepted "truths." Although this article focuses on qualitative methods myths, instructors can create similar true/false tests for any book or article.

If, as Paul and Elder (2003) maintain, being able to think critically is one of the hallmarks of educated people, we owe it to our students to both exemplify critical thinking in our lectures and to invite our students to join us in critically examining their texts. Building upon the Qualitative Inquiry literature as well as my own work on non-probability sampling, I offer my responses to each of ten true/false statements and suggest possible teaching strategies for each one of them. The goal is not to substitute one "truth" for another but rather to demonstrate that a great deal of knowledge is contestable.

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