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Read More About It

by Marilyn Lichtman

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Family therapy researchers might be interested to know about the acceptance of qualitative research paradigms in other disciplines. In this article I'm going to give you the latest information about the field of education.

I wandered through the corridors of the hotel in San Francisco last October at the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy Convention, looking for those family therapists who might be interested in qualitative research. I found a few very interesting presentations at the poster sessions and one very lively, albeit small, group of individuals willing to give up a Sunday afternoon in San Francisco to consider qualitative research.

I made a similar excursion in Boston hotels in April this year at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Convention. I found many interesting presentations addressing methodological issues and reporting on the results of completed research. It struck me as odd that the field of family therapy has not yet "found" qualitative research to the extent that education has. So I'd like to share some of what is going on in education.

Qualitative research has been of interest to educational researchers for some time, although the bulk of research published in education continues to be of an experimental or quasi-experimental nature. Many educational research departments adopt the more traditional stance of the experimentalist or logical positivist view of research.

Those who espouse the virtues of qualitative research have not often had publication avenues open to them and, when they do, they are not usually in the mainstream. Their manuscripts, while sometimes published, may not always find their way into journals that have the widest readership.

So it has been very exciting to witness a significant change in position by the major journal of the professional association in educational research. *The American Educational Research Journal* (AERJ), the primary research journal in education published by AERA, has taken a strong stance in favor of qualitative research. A public call for "manuscripts based on qualitative research" was made in 1987 by Mary Lee Smith in an invited article.

In her careful paper (Smith, 1987), she acknowledges some of the difficulties in opening up the journal to qualitative research. These ranged from differing labels (What is meant by qualitative research?), differing views of reality (Is there a reality separate from the observer?), of the objects to be studied (Should we study an institution, an individual, or what?), and of the criteria for judging studies. Most importantly, she suggests that such a policy "can only mean that editors will use different criteria to judge and select such studies from those they use for experiments

and surveys" (p. 182). While she does not specifically address criteria that will be used to evaluate manuscripts, she admonishes editors to "become ethnographers of the culture of qualitative research. Then reviews can be fairly solicited and properly understood" (p. 182).

By 1990, the Association had made moves to live up to its words. It divided the editorial tasks of AERJ into two areas and assigned two separate editors. Wayne Urban, the editor of the Section on Social and Institutional Analysis, says he is looking for manuscripts that are not necessarily of a psychological or experimental orientation. Presumably, qualitative research would fit under the rubric of "historical, rhetorical, interpretive, narrative, comparative, legal and critical approaches." Hilda Borko, the other editor, does not specify methodology when she identifies articles to be sent to the Section on Teaching, Learning, and Human Development. Presumably experimental research is not the only valued methodology.

Finally, I refer you to a very interesting new book edited by Elliot Eisner and Alan Peshkin (1990). *Qualitative Inquiry in Education: The Continuing Debate* includes those papers that were presented at a meeting at Stanford in 1988. This small conference (some thirty invited guests) was co-sponsored by Teachers College Press. Five issues were addressed at the conference: subjectivity and objectivity, validity, generalizability, ethics, and the uses of qualitative inquiry. In addition to the two invited speakers for each topic, there was also an invited discussant.

The introduction to the book tells it all. "New ways of thinking about knowing and knowledge are emerging, fresh conceptions of generalization are being offered up for consideration, validity and reliability are being nudged by concepts that are quite the same. In short, the conversation is getting deeper, more complex, and more problematic" (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990, p. 11). Family therapy researchers will welcome those refreshing and thought-provoking papers.

Other interesting advances in education include new journals, conferences, and symposia remain to be discussed at a later date. I invite those of you in family therapy to become acquainted with these new ideas.

References

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