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Jeanne Marecek

Swarthmore College, jmarece1@swarthmore.edu

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Working between Two Worlds

Qualitative Methods and Psychology

Jeanne Marecek, Michelle Fine, and Louise Kidder

THE HEART OF A QUALITATIVE STANCE is the desire to make sense of lived experience. All three of us were originally trained in experimental and quantitative methods; we came to a qualitative stance by working in places where cultural difference squarely confronted us: in Sri Lanka, India, and Japan and in urban schools in the United States. In these settings, we had little choice but to work inductively. The ways that people understood their world and moved about in it were foreign to us as outsiders. We learned to use perplexing encounters, strained interactions, and the inevitable faux pas as peepholes into worlds different from our own. We were led to a qualitative stance by our need to understand experiences that were different from our own, and lives that moved to music we didn't hear.

Qualitative Inquiry and Social Issues: Reclaiming a History

Although such methods are currently relegated to the margins of social psychology in the United States, several classic studies used field-based

qualitative approaches. In the 1930s, John Dollard conducted field-based, qualitative work on race and class relations. A researcher in the psychology department at Yale, Dollard went south to learn how race operated within the social life of a town he called “Southerntown.” He was a participant-observer and an outsider, a northern white psychologist naive about southern race relations. He recognized that his naiveté necessitated that he be educated by his data:

This social sharing was of two degrees and involved two roles: there was first the casual participation possible as a “Yankee down here studying Negroes” and second the more intensive participation and the more specific role of the life history taker. . . . The primary research instrument would seem to be the observing human intelligence trying to make sense of the experience; and the experience was full of problems and uncertainty in fact. Perhaps it does not compare well with more objective-seeming instruments, such as a previously prepared set of questions but as to this question the reader can judge for himself. It has the value of offering to perception the actual, natural human contact with all of the real feelings present and unguarded. (1937, 18)

At the heart of Dollard’s work is his qualitative stance: His desire to make sense of “human contact with all of the real feelings present and unguarded.” Although Dollard headed south with a research agenda, his field of variables was not specified in advance. He could gather data that moved across the terrain of racial, political, and economic hierarchies of the South.

In the 1950s, Muzafer and Carolyn Sherif and their coworkers immersed themselves in the rivalries of boys at a summer camp (Sherif et al. 1961). Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schacter (1956) infiltrated a doomsday sect to observe what happens when prophecies fail. Philip Zimbardo and his students examined de-individuation in a mock prison (Zimbardo et al. 1975). David Rosenhan (1973) and a group of colleagues and students entered a mental hospital by feigning hallucinations. All these researchers explicated nuances and textures of real life. They explored their biases and worried about ethics and relationships in the field. Nonetheless, no one doubted that they were doing psychological research.

A qualitative stance invites broad-based inquiry into spaces that are un-

documented in other studies. Unlike a hypothetico-deductive stance, in which a fixed set of hypotheses constrains the field of investigation, a qualitative stance allows researchers to pry open territory about which they have only vague hunches. Instead of specifying at the outset the variables whose main effects and interactions will be tracked, qualitative workers begin with a period of exploration and immersion. They enter the field without structured questionnaires, predetermined variables, or research designs; only later do they narrow their focus. Propelled by a desire to know what is unknown, to unravel mysteries, to be surprised and jostled by what turns up, qualitative researchers embark on an intellectual adventure without a map or even a clear destination. This way of working requires giving up control, going along for the ride, not always having hold of the steering wheel—and still taking good notes.

Qualitative Work and “Bias”

When we peer into the cubbyholes and crevices where qualitative work in psychology has been stuffed, we find researchers admitting and apologizing for their “biases.” Reflecting on his experiences as a pseudopatient, David Rosenhan wrote in *Science* about how stunned he was by the depths of depersonalization provoked by his short stay:

Neither anecdotal nor “hard” data can convey the overwhelming sense of powerlessness which invades the individual as he is continually exposed to the depersonalization of the psychiatric hospital. . . .

I and the other pseudopatients in the psychiatric setting had distinctively negative reactions. We do not pretend to describe the subjective experiences of true patients. Theirs may be different from ours, particularly with the passage of time and the necessary process of adaptation to one’s environment. But we can and do speak to the relatively more objective indicators of treatment within the hospital. It would be a mistake and a very unfortunate one to consider that what happened to us derived from malice or stupidity on the part of the staff. Quite the contrary, our overwhelming impression of them was of people who really cared, who were committed, and who were uncommonly intelligent. Where they failed, as they sometimes did painfully, it would be more accurate to attribute those failures to the environment in which they, too, found themselves than to personal callousness. (1973, 265, 268)

Rosenhan is here confessing what he calls an “overwhelming impression.” His personal experience dramatizes the power of institutional arrangements over both the good will of the staff and the sanity of the residents. Without his self-reflective experience as participant and observer inside the institution, Rosenhan’s work would have lacked the passion and much of the evidence that makes it so compelling.

Self-reflection and acknowledgment of subjectivity are now intrinsic to scholarship in many intellectual domains, but they have not yet become so in psychology. Yet critical self-reflection is not a new idea in social psychology. Nearly fifty years ago, the Sherifs had this to say:

The research man [*sic*] has his own group identifications. We have noted that every group represents a point of view as it stands in relation to other groups. Every group has its own explicit or implicit premises as to the nature of human relations, as to the directions that the values and goals of group relations should take. From the outset, research and generalizations are doomed to be deflections or mere justifications of the point of view and premises of the group or groups with which one identifies himself, if one does not start his work by clear, deliberate recognition and neutralizing of his personal involvement in these issues. If this painful process of deliberate recognition and neutralizing of one’s own personal involvements is not achieved, his autism will greatly influence his design of the study and his collection and treatment of data. (1953, 11)

This acknowledgment of personal involvements was largely forgotten in the ensuing decades, as was the injunction that researchers reflect on their positions and allegiances. Instead, we psychologists came to trust that proper scientific methods would protect us from our “autisms.” Further, we came to believe that such methods would yield what Donna Haraway (1988) called the “god’s-eye view of reality,” a view uninfluenced by the vantage point of onlooker. However, denying the biases inherent in the privileged position of a researcher does not negate them.

Qualitative Work: On Listening and Words

A psychology concerned with social life should attend to people’s words and their meaning (Billig 1994). Social relations are constituted and man-

aged through language. As the medium of social negotiations about truth and reality, language thus determines what we see and know. When researchers restrict participants to speaking only in our terms, we lose access to theirs. When researchers use structured attitude scales, inventories, and tests, the respondents' standpoints are located on dimensions of the researchers' making.

In contrast, a qualitative stance involves listening to and theorizing about what emerges when people use their own words to make sense of their lived experience. It requires paying attention to the lexicon participants use and to the interpretive repertoire upon which they draw (Potter and Wetherell 1987); it involves interpreting silences, gaps in a narrative, or the absence of a language for certain things (Visweswaran 1994). By working with people's own words, we hope to bring into social psychology's purview rich stories of relationships, struggles, despair, and engagements.

Our own projects illustrate how people use words to connect to, reproduce, resist, and transform the contexts in which they live. Jeanne Marecek and Diane Kravetz, in their study of feminist therapists, have asked how feminist therapists' identities and ideas about their work have shifted under the pressures of the antifeminist backlash of the 1990s (Marecek and Kravetz 1998a). Only two of the eighty-nine therapists they interviewed could label themselves publicly as feminist therapists, although many said that they had openly embraced that title in the past. Some took pains to conceal their feminist identity even from clients in ongoing therapy. Nonetheless, feminism remained central to their work and their personal identities. Some managed this tension between the public and private by discursively erasing the boundary between feminist therapy and therapy in general, equating feminist ideals with norms of "good mental health" and "common sense" and feminist therapy with "just good therapy." As one therapist said, "I can't imagine that anyone could be an effective healthy therapist without being a feminist therapist." Some demarcated themselves as feminists who were exempt from the objectionable stereotypes of feminists with statements like "*I don't stuff it down people's throats,*" "*I'm pretty gentle,*" and "*I like men*" (Marecek and Kravetz 1998b). This rhetorical strategy is double-edged, inadvertently lending credence to the very stereotypes it seems to challenge.

Susan Condor (1986) described her discontent with work that surveyed nonfeminist or right-wing women merely to reaffirm the obvious: that “they” were not “us.” She implored feminist researchers to engage with qualitative methods, to listen to the words of participants. She challenged feminist colleagues to dare to learn how right-wing women made sense of the world. We extend and broaden Condor’s challenge: Dare we learn how those who are not “us”—who are impoverished, or mentally ill, or urban teenagers, or even just nonpsychologists—make sense of the world? And do we dare learn how they are “us”?

Working as a rape crisis volunteer, Michelle Fine (1983) met a young African-American woman, Altamese, who had been gang raped. They spent many hours talking in the hospital. Michelle describes their encounter in retrospect: “I realize now that I was trying to talk her into ways of coping. I doused her with all that I as a feminist counselor, white academic, and social psychologist, believed would be good for her: Report them, tell your social worker, let your family know, don’t keep it in. . . .”

At some point, Altamese had enough of Michelle’s advice and let her know that she would not press charges, nor would she let her family know what happened. In her community, an African-American neighborhood in North Philadelphia, the police might not believe her. If she told her brothers, they might go out and kill the perpetrators. Telling a therapist might help briefly, but she would still carry the pain inside. When Michelle stopped talking and listened to Altamese’s story, she could hear her way of making sense of and surviving in a world where neither the justice system nor the streets were trustworthy; where protecting her mother, brothers, and children was more important than abstract notions of justice. Michelle could have measured Altamese’s degree of learned helplessness, her attributional biases, or her external locus of control. Instead, she listened and was thereby able to hear how racism, poverty, and personal and cultural circumstances made a profound difference in her and Altamese’s responses to a gang rape.

When researchers listen with close attention to what respondents say, the respondents become active agents, the creators of the worlds they inhabit and the interpreters of their experiences. And as researchers become witnesses, bringing their knowledge of theory and their interpretive methods to participants’ stories, they too become active agents.

Qualitative Work: From the Ground Up

Qualitative approaches are less formulaic than orthodox psychology methods. Researchers may alter their approach and even their initial hypotheses upon discovering that something else works better. For instance, when Louise Kidder (1992) began interviewing Japanese students who were “returnees,” she asked students who had lived outside of Japan to talk about what it was like to live abroad and to return to Japan. She began with a series of open-ended questions in a structured interview schedule. No sooner had she begun than she discovered that it was much more effective to let the students talk without interruption. Their stories centered on what it was like to return to Japan and find they were no longer considered “really” Japanese. Their body language and attitudes marked them as “returnees.” Listening to these stories, Louise began to discern the requirements for “being Japanese.”

For conventionally trained psychologists, switching to a qualitative stance can induce vertigo; many of the usual methodological props are pulled away. Qualitative researchers search through transcripts or field notes for the glimmer of a pattern instead of coding structured data sets. They pore over what other psychologists might consider “error variance” and “uncodable” responses, awaiting inspiration and serendipitous realizations.

The practices of qualitative work stand in sharp contrast to those we were taught in graduate school. We learned to defer data collection until we had clearly specified our hypotheses, operationalized our variables, pilot-tested our measures, and specified our coding and analytic strategies. We maintained tight control over research outcomes, strictly limiting what participants could do or say. Structured interviews and questionnaires provided predetermined options for responding, typically phrased in a standard format stripped of nuance and local meaning (e.g., Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree . . .). Our participants could register experiences that we researchers were not ready to hear only by scribbling in the margins of a questionnaire, amending a question before answering it, or using the option marked “Other: _____” Typically such efforts at communication were ignored or even considered “uncodable.”

We learned to stand at a safe distance from those we studied, running them through procedures designed to extract data from them. Research

was not a shared, intersubjective activity. This stance is akin to what Robert Stolorow calls “the theory of the isolated mind” (Atwood and Stolorow 1984). Such a stance makes it hard to learn the participants’ point of view, as Joyce Ladner notes:

The relationship between researcher and his subjects, by definition, resembles that of the oppressor and the oppressed, because it is the oppressor who defines the problem, the nature of the research, and to some extent, the quality of interaction between him and his subjects. . . . This inability to understand and research the fundamental problem—neocolonialism—prevents most social researchers from being able accurately to observe and analyze Black life and culture and the impact that racism and oppression have on Blacks. (1971, vii)

Qualitative Research: Social Life and Power

Michel Foucault (1980) has observed that modern societies regulate their citizens without brute force, relying instead on self-discipline and self-surveillance. Power in these circumstances is diffuse; it operates “from below,” flowing through social relations, knowledge structures, and regimes of truth that justify existing hierarchies. To grasp how power from below operates, we need to listen to the negotiated narratives of power that flow through streets and gutters; to situate our research in mundane conversations and practices; to see how people are situated in and by institutional contexts, and how they maneuver to resituate themselves (Guinier, Fine, and Balin 1997; Smith 1987).

During a sojourn in India, Louise (Kidder, forthcoming) studied expatriates’ conversations with one another about their domestic servants. She noted that expatriates occupied the elevated status of “masters,” enjoying a status and benefits that exceeded what they experienced back home. Instead of making Indian friends and learning Indian ways of living, they became part of an expatriate subculture and found their friends among others like themselves. As wealthy, white foreigners, they occupied the outsider’s position of privilege and power. But being relatively unacquainted with Indian culture and society, they were also dependent on domestic servants for cultural knowledge and daily living skills. The relationship of master to servant was not simply hierarchical; power and dependency were intertwined. As Albert Memmi says, “[t]he dominant person isn’t always

the least dependent one" (1984, 8). An American woman's story illustrates her family's dependence on their Indian cook:

We discovered that we were poisoning [my husband] right in our own kitchen. I wasn't getting sick at all, but he had something all the time. . . . Finally, we realized that he was eating sandwiches and I wasn't—and it must have been the mayonnaise that [the cook] was making. I don't know if it was a batch of bad eggs or what, but that was doing it. He was getting poisoned in our own house! (Kidder 1997, 164)

Jeanne's work in Sri Lanka has concerned that country's dramatic upsurge in suicide deaths. Among Sri Lankans, interpersonal conflicts often trigger suicidal acts, particularly when loss of honor, face, status, or respect is at stake. As a social practice, suicidal acts serve to reestablish one's rightful place in the hierarchy or to redress a grievance by pointing the finger of blame toward those who are at fault. (Marecek 1997). In one project, Jeanne studied news reports of official inquiries into suicide deaths, asking how these reports reasserted interpretive authority over the death (Marecek 1995). Among other things, she found that if suicide victims were in subordinate positions, the news reports emphasized their emotional state, especially the culturally disapproved emotions of anger and desire for revenge. The instigating actions of higher-status individuals (e.g., beatings by one's husband; coercion or extortion by a petty government officer) were mentioned perfunctorily and put aside. In contrast, if the victim was the higher-status party, the texts emphasized the instigating actions of the other (e.g., a daughter who eloped; a drunken son; a disobedient wife) or impersonal societal forces (e.g., poverty; unemployment). For higher-status victims, emotional state was not a focus. Thus, the news reports worked to concentrate moral opprobrium on lower-status parties and deflect it from higher-status ones.

In the United States, Louise studied the negotiation of meaning between a hypnotist and her subjects (Kidder 1972). Enrolled as a participant in a hypnosis workshop, Louise recorded not only the hypnotic inductions but also the arguments that ensued when participants said such things as "I don't think I was really in a trance." Her analyses focused on how the hypnotist and doubting participants negotiated what hypnosis is and what makes someone a good or bad hypnotic subject. The frameworks for Louise's analysis—*attribution and social learning theory*—come from

the heart of social psychology. She explored the process by which the hypnotist and the workshop participants allocated blame when someone failed to go into trance. She also documented how the hypnotist meted out praise to compliant participants and punishment to doubters. Louise's work illuminated both the power of language to define participants' reality and how that discursive power was not evenly distributed in that social situation.

Rigorous qualitative research involves attention to context, meanings, and power relations in data collection and analysis. Qualitative researchers situate words, discourses, persons, relations, and groups within local, societal, and sometimes global contexts. Such an approach enables a study of power relations that more conventional psychological methods of study, such as individual-difference testing or laboratory experimentation, preclude.

Qualitative Work and Ethical Shadows

In conversations that swirl around qualitative work, issues of ethics and responsibility surface that go far beyond the formal American Psychological Association (APA) ethical guidelines. Why is qualitative work the lightning rod for such concerns? We contend that it is time for all psychologists to talk seriously about why we do the work we do, whom we choose as our participants, and at which constituencies our work is aimed. Are we willing to engage the variety of standpoints that exist in any single context? How much do our own standpoints shape which stories we are told, which ones we are able to hear, which ones we take to be data, and which ones we don't? What are the ethics of studying "down" and thus, deliberately or not, replicating a focus on people too often held responsible for social-structural decay? Whether we study "down" or "up," what are the ethics of telling or not telling participants what we are really up to? To what extent do we anticipate the political and ethical implications of our work? Do we have an obligation to do so? In an interview, Kenneth Clark reflected on ethical concerns that he and Mamie Clark had about their research on black children's self-images:

"We were really disturbed by our findings," Kenneth Clark recalls, "and we sat on them for a number of years. What was surprising was the degree to

which the children suffered from self-rejection, with its truncating effect on their personalities, and the earliness of the corrosive awareness of color. I don't think we quite realized the extent of the cruelty of racism and how hard it hit. . . . Some of these children, particularly in the North, were reduced to crying when presented with the [black] dolls and asked to identify with them. They looked at me as if I were the devil for putting them in this predicament. Let me tell you, it was a traumatic experience for me as well." (Kluger 1975, quoted in Cross 1991, 29)

Clark worried about the impact of his research on the children and on the community in general. His research methods were not qualitative, but his ethical concerns—expressed in the interview, but not in his research text—are ones that often emerge in qualitative work.

The ethical issues that surface in qualitative research go beyond preserving the rights of individual participants. They are not put to rest by scrupulous adherence to procedures for informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. Participants in qualitative studies may demand to know "who owns the data?" This is an ethical question that participants in laboratory studies do not think to ask. Whose interpretation counts? Who has veto power? What will happen to the relationships that were formed during the research? What are the researcher's obligations after the data are collected? Can the data be used against the participants? Will the data be used on their behalf? Do researchers have an obligation to protect the communities and social groups they study, or just to guard certain rights of individuals? Such questions reveal how much ethical terrain is uncharted by APA guidelines and institutional review boards. It is qualitative researchers who are wrestling with such ethical dilemmas, but the dilemmas are present in much psychological research, regardless of the researcher's methodological commitments.

Conclusion

Our enthusiasm for qualitative work notwithstanding, we sometimes have crises of identity and loyalty: Are we still psychologists? What is at stake in that identity? Apart from its methods, what is psychology? Why is the disciplinary boundary now drawn where it is? Should one be drawn at all?

We have a sense of urgency in asking why psychology in the United

States lags so far behind our international and interdisciplinary colleagues in developing qualitative methods. As John Richardson notes,

There is a great deal of scope for psychologists in North America to catch up with their counterparts in the UK and with their compatriots in the other social sciences in terms of their understanding and appreciation of qualitative research methods. (1996, 8)

We do not claim that qualitative methods are new or radical or necessarily progressive. We do not claim that qualitative work is the only emancipatory approach or that such work always yields emancipatory results. Any research strategy can be used for emancipatory or repressive ends. Our goal here has been to give evidence of a rich history of and vibrant future for qualitative work in psychology. In doing so, we hope we have laid a strong bridge on which psychologists can walk between worlds.

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