

12.

Qualitative Educational Research: The Philosophical Issues

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This chapter examines qualitative educational research through the lens of philosophy. I sort out the issues in terms of four of philosophy's traditional subareas: epistemology, ontology, political theory, and ethics. As we shall see, the issues overlap and crisscross in many ways.

My task is complicated by the fact that the term "qualitative" as deployed in educational research is markedly vague and ambiguous. This is due in no small way to the ongoing quantitative-qualitative debate within the educational research community, in which the descriptors "quantitative" and "qualitative" have been attached willy-nilly to data, to research methods, and to broader epistemological "paradigms." In light of the foggy climate for discussion this creates, a clearer understanding of the philosophical controversies within qualitative educational research may be obtained by first pausing to briefly describe some of what preceded them.

The most rudimentary meaning of the quantitative-qualitative distinction—as well as the clearest—is associated with data. Categorical data count as qualitative, and ordinal, interval, and ratio data count as quantitative. From here, the distinction has been used less literally, to include research design (i.e., experimental versus nonexperimental) as well as data analysis (i.e., statistical versus interpretive). Data, design, and analysis go together to make up the distinction between quantitative and qualitative "methods" (e.g., Guba, 1987), or "techniques and procedures" (e.g., Smith & Heshusius, 1986). Finally, the quantitative-qualitative distinction has been used in a way far removed from its more straightforward meaning; it also applies to epistemological "paradigms."

Ultimately, participants in the quantitative-qualitative debate conceded the worth and feasibility of combining quantitative and qualitative techniques and procedures, and the debate devolved into what Gage (1989) calls the "paradigm wars." That

is, the worth and feasibility of combining more expansive epistemological paradigms, particularly "positivism" versus various versions of the "new paradigm" (e.g., Guba, 1987) became the locus of contention.

Arguably, the quantitative-qualitative debate should have been a nonstarter, both because it proceeded by stretching the meanings of the terms involved beyond all recognition and because positivism, with which quantitative research is so often identified, is philosophically moribund. But this is not a thesis I need establish here. (See, e.g., Howe, 1985, 1988, 1992.) It is sufficient for my purposes in this chapter to observe that qualitative educational research has secured its place as legitimate and that there are significant philosophical controversies among the views it encompasses. These controversies are the focus of this chapter.

One more preliminary comment. "Interpretivism" is one meaning for "qualitative" that emerged from the quantitative-qualitative debate, and this is how I shall use it throughout this chapter, unless I indicate otherwise. In light of the vagueness and ambiguity described previously, such a stipulation is required for this chapter to unfold in a coherent fashion. More than this, it should also lend greater focus to a conversation that has too often been at cross-purposes.

Epistemology

Rabinow and Sullivan (1987) coined the phrase the "interpretive turn" to describe the epistemological shift under way in the social sciences in the mid- to late-20th century, away from positivism and toward hermeneutics. That Rabinow is an anthropologist and Sullivan is a philosopher symbolizes the merging of the social sciences and the humanities associated with interpretivism. This point is addressed explicitly by Charles

The author wishes to thank James Garrison, Virginia Polytechnic and State University, and Denis Phillips, Stanford University, for their valuable comments on drafts of this chapter.

Taylor in his seminal "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man" (1987). He rejects the view that there can be any scientifically neutral, impersonal language (a central tenet of positivism) with which to describe and interpret human activities. Rather, "we have to think of man [sic] as a *self-interpreting* animal. . . . [T]here is no such thing as the structure of meanings for him independently of his interpretation of them. . . ." (p. 46, emphasis added). (See also Taylor, 1991, 1995.) This general perspective provides the epistemological underpinning for the emphasis on including marginalized and excluded "voices," so prominent today in feminist and postmodernist educational research.

Interpretivists share a constructivist epistemology, generally construed. That is, against classical empiricists and their offspring, the positivists, interpretivists uniformly reject what Dewey called the "spectator view" of knowledge—the view that knowledge is built up piece by piece, by accumulation of an evergrowing and increasingly complex arrangement of passively received observations. Instead, knowledge, particularly in social research, must be seen as actively constructed—as culturally and historically grounded, as laden with moral and political values, and as serving certain interests and purposes.

But this creates a formidable problem for interpretivists: Is knowledge (or what passes for it) merely a cultural-historical artifact? Is it merely a collection of moral and political values? Does it merely serve certain interests and purposes? There are two basic responses to these questions from within the interpretivist (qualitative) camp: postmodernist and transformationist.¹

Postmodernists seem to answer "yes" to these questions—or at least seem to have no grounds for answering "no." Consider Lyotard's definition of postmodernism: "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives" (1987, p. 74). Briefly, a metanarrative is a grand legitimating story, one important feature of which is its abstraction from time, place, and culture. Metanarratives include grand epistemological stories, such as the inevitable progress science, and grand political stories, such as Marxism and liberalism.

The Marxist and liberal traditions each embrace the goal of the emancipation of humankind, and postmodernists are highly suspicious of them for precisely this reason. Because the goal of emancipation incorporates a peculiarly Western epistemology, pursuing it serves, as Lyotard says, to "terrorize" peoples who had no part in writing it. It is, after all, a time-, place-, and culture-bound story of human knowledge and, accordingly, is a very bad fit for many sociocultural groups. Worse, by presupposing certain conceptions of knowledge and rationality, it masks the manner in which modern Western societies oppress the many others that exist within them and is thus a bad story for Western societies themselves. In the end, it blunts rather than fosters emancipation (e.g., Ellsworth, 1992).

Michel Foucault (1987) shares Lyotard's attitude toward metanarratives and would supplant them with what he calls

"genealogy."² Foucault's method is to unearth (he has also used the metaphor of archeology) the historical antecedents that have given rise to the rationalization of modern institutions. For Foucault, rationality is irremediably historical and contingent, and there can be no extrahistorical touchstones—metanarratives—of the kind philosophers have sought since Plato. Related to this interpretation of rationality, knowledge and power are inextricably wedded in "regimes of truth" that function to "normalize" persons, that is, to render them acquiescent and "useful" vis-à-vis the institutions of modern society.

This description of the postmodernist incredulity toward metanarratives should be sufficient to elucidate the basis for the general criticism that so routinely leaps to the minds of critics: that postmodernism is hopelessly relativistic and self-defeating; that it cannot, if consistently held, justify any knowledge claims whatsoever. For, if all knowledge claims are thoroughly context-bound and are merely masks for interests and power, then any claims the postmodernists advance themselves are also possessed of these features.

Transformationists, as I call them, join postmodernists in rejecting the traditional philosophical quest for ultimate epistemological touchstones that transcend contingent human experience. But "overcoming epistemology," to use Charles Taylor's phrase (1995, chapter 1), does not entail abandoning knowledge and rationality as illusory. Transformationists see their task as working out defensible conceptions of knowledge and rationality that have contingent human experience as their basis. In this way, the transformationist project is continuous with the emancipatory project of modernity. The postmodernist project, by contrast, is discontinuous. It seeks a fundamental break—or "rupture."

Among transformationists may be counted pragmatists, critical theorists, and (certain) feminists.³ How such thinkers have worked (and are working) out their conceptions of rationality and knowledge, much less whether they are successful, is not something I can describe in any detail here. Thomas Kuhn (1970) perhaps provides the best general description of the transformationist view when he likens it to Darwinian evolution. In short, there exists no acontextualized criterion of knowledge toward which science must move. Instead, scientific theories are supported to the extent that they handle the problematic better than their competitors do. Criteria for making these judgments exist, but they may not be mechanically applied and are not settled once and for all.

Transformationists take very seriously the avoidance of the inference that embracing the interpretive turn requires effectively abandoning reason. Transformationists prefer their tentative and fallibilistic project to postmodernism's all-out attack on reason—an attack they believe winds up nullifying all knowledge claims, including any advanced by postmodernists themselves. As Benjamin Barber (1992) puts this challenge to postmodernism:

¹ Dividing views into these two obviously glosses much complexity, both regarding the difficulties in drawing such a line at all and regarding the vast differences among views on either side of the issue. Given the level of generality at which this chapter is written, I think the distinction between postmodernists and transformationists is workable.

² Arguably, Foucault is not a postmodernist, but a poststructuralist—and even that is debatable. I will ignore these niceties.

³ Some feminists are postmodernists, but many belong in the transformationist camp, a few of which include Alison Jaggar, Seyla Benhabib, Iris Marion Young, Catharine MacKinnon, Lorraine Code, and Sandra Harding.

Reason can be a smoke screen for interest, but the argument that it is a smoke screen itself depends on reason -or we are caught up in an endless regression in which each argument exposing the dependency of someone else's argument on arbitrariness and self-interest is in turn shown to be self-interested and arbitrary. (p. 109)

The Ontology of the Self

Ontology is that part of philosophy that concerns itself with the kinds of entities that exist and the features they possess. For example, do numbers exist? in what sense? where can we find them? How about social structures? Do selves exist? What features, if any, do different selves share? How are selves formed? Are selves relatively stable or always in flux?

In the previous section, I described interpretivists as embracing a constructivist conception of knowledge. This feature of interpretivism renders the philosophical distinction between epistemology and ontology considerably more artificial than my way of dividing up this chapter may suggest. (See also Taylor, 1987.) For how human beings know and are known, as well as what knowledge consists in, is inextricably bound up with the kinds of things human beings are. And there is a further complication. Because human beings actively construct their social reality, the kinds of things human beings *are* is not necessarily the kinds of things they *must* or *ought to be*. Thus, distinguishing the moral-political from the ontological (and, by extension, from the epistemological) is also artificial—so much so that altogether forestalling the introduction of political-moral ideals until the next section would be counterproductive as well as misleading.

Be they postmodernists or transformationists, interpretivists are like-minded in their rejection of the positivistic conception of human nature, in which human beings are portrayed as passive recipients of stimuli, explicable solely in terms of the operation of exogenous causes. Rather than (or in addition to) this characterization of human nature, interpretivists hold that human beings are self-creating, or, as Brian Fay (1987) puts it, "activist" in their behavior. That is to say, it is not as if human beings are mere molecules in motion, simply pushed to and fro by existing social arrangements and cultural norms. Instead, they actively shape and reshape these constraints on behavior. But there is a problem, and it parallels the one discussed earlier in connection with the nature of knowledge. Are human beings completely active? Is the molecules-in-motion characterization of them totally erroneous?

Insofar as postmodernists seek to "penetrate" and "deconstruct" the workings of social structures, and as transformationists seek to "undistort" communication so as to equalize power and "emancipate" human beings, each presupposes that human beings are not altogether active and that they can indeed be unwittingly pushed to and fro by unseen and unknown causes. Furthermore, because human nature is so malleable, the passive, positivistic conception of human nature can function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Dewey (1938) observes in this connection, after years of receiving and then regurgitating information presented by their teachers, school children will develop the habit of expecting (and demanding) that they play this passive role in learning. That is, they will be conditioned to fit the positivist-behaviorist conception of human nature.

So, what is wrong with this conception? Nothing. Nothing, that is, unless we are prepared to commit to the view that this conception ought not guide social and educational research, that some version of the activist conception should. But let me set this observation aside for now in order to look into the controversy between postmodernists and transformationists about the ontology of the self.

Postmodernists attribute to the traditional liberal and Marxist "metanarratives" a commitment to an essential human self, a fixed model of human nature, to which all humankind should aspire and in terms of which all should be measured—things like "rational autonomy" and "species being," respectively. Postmodernists emphasize that, contrary to these "essentialist" conceptions, identities come in many forms, associated with race, class, and gender, among others. Identities must be seen as neither unified nor fixed, but as various and continually "displaced-replaced" (e.g., Lather, 1991a). "Decentering" is the watchword: Placing the universal Everyman allegedly presupposed by Marxist and liberal metanarratives at the center can only function to "normalize" and "terrorize" the many Others on the margins.

On the transformationist view (and here I use John Searle, 1995, as my example), maintaining that something is real does not entail maintaining that it cannot be "constructed," much less that it must be essential and unchangeable. Automobiles, for example, would not be real if this were generally true. But consider money, the existence and nature of which is much less a "brute fact" than automobiles. Money is what Searle calls an "institutional fact"—a kind of fact that grows out of and would not exist but for human social arrangements and "collective intentionality." Nonetheless, money does not come into or go out of existence on the basis of what individual people believe or "construct." For example, suppose someone owes me \$1,000. I cannot reject cash payment and demand gold because I happen to believe that currency is worth no more than the paper it is printed on. Whether I like it or not, currency is legal tender for the payment of debts.

The situation is parallel in the case of Searle's less formal, "social facts." Take gender. To be sure, there have been and continue to be institutional facts associated with gender (e.g., exclusion from voting in the past and exclusion from certain forms of military duty today). But more far-reaching are shared beliefs, expectations, know-hows, and practices that make up the social facts of gender. In general, the feminine gender is identified with nurturance and preserving relationship on the one hand, and with a lack of worldliness and the capacity for abstract reasoning on the other hand. Women thus have been historically directed into activities such as homemaking, nursing, and elementary school teaching and away from engineering, politics, and science. Independent of what individual girls and women believe—and like it or not—there is a "gender regimen" (Connell 1987) associated with a particular kind of feminine identity that is, in turn, associated with a large complex of social facts that shape it.

These social facts must be reckoned with in thinking about identity. And a little introspection reveals we cannot construct new identities for ourselves with the ease with which we can don a new set of clothes. Changing our being requires a good deal of time and effort, and there is no guarantee of success.

Partly because of this people often do not want to change, and they believe it is oppressive to expect them to. Instead, people want "recognition" of who they are (Taylor, 1994). And if this general observation about the phenomenology of the self were not true, it would be very difficult to make any sense whatsoever out of the demands to recognize diversity that are so prominent on the current political and educational scenes. Why not just avoid all the fuss by "deconstructing" old identities and putting new ones in their place?

As the preceding paragraph suggests, there is no way to completely separate moral-political commitments from a conception of human nature. This point echoes for a second time my remarks at the beginning of this section, and I will develop the implications in greater detail later. Here, I bracket, as far as possible, the moral-political in order to further look into the controversy between postmodernists and transformationists about the ontology of the self.

Searle (1995) employs the concept of "background of intentionality" to describe the peculiar context of human behavior and development. Against both mentalism (all human behavior is explicable in terms of conscious or unconscious understanding and intent) and behaviorism (all human behavior is explicable in terms of physical movements), Searle maintains that human beings simply have the capacity to gain the know-how required to respond to shared social and institutional facts in accordance with normative expectations, largely by virtue of their linguistic capacity to manage symbols.

Within this general framework, Searle develops the following general schema to explicate the ontological status of social facts: " x counts as y in z ." To again take Searle's favorite example, money, the U.S. dollar bill (x) counts as legal tender (y) in the United States (z). One of Searle's fundamental points is that, unlike gold, for example, there is nothing about the physical features of a dollar bill that gives rise to its value and to the normatively sanctioned behaviors that surround it. Rather, its value, its counting as legal tender, is a result of "collective intentionality."

Gender, race, and a whole host of other social categories can be viewed on a similar model, though it might be more suggestively formulated as x marks y in z . Race and gender (x 's) each serve to mark a constellation of normatively sanctioned behaviors (y 's) associated with various contexts (z 's), including the context of schools. (Here I remind the reader that I am bracketing the issue of whether the norms in question are good. Norms need not be morally sanctioned to regulate human behavior.) In this way, although social categories (x 's) have no essence independent of what humans have constructed, they, like money, are no less real for that.

Gaining the know-how associated with collective intentionality and learning how to negotiate the social terrain are long and complex tasks. And because identity formation is "dialogical," as Charles Taylor says (1994), individuals unavoidably incorporate into their identities the normative structure associated with social categories and practices. Through many different dialogues in many different contexts people learn what it is to be a man or a woman, to be gay or lesbian, or to be an African-American high school student.

It should be observed that the general characterization of the ontology of the self that is provided by thinkers like Searle and

Taylor is not one with which all postmodernists must disagree. For instance, Foucault (1979) says: "It would be wrong to say the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has reality, it is produced permanently, around, on, within the body . . ." (p. 29).

Postmodernists who suggest that identities may be easily and matter-of-factly "displaced-replaced" must concede that selves have to remain in place at least long enough to be the object of deconstruction. In the case of women, for instance, they may sometimes celebrate the traditional feminine identity they have formed, as in "gynocentric" feminism (Young, 1990), and may sometimes lament it, as in feeling like "a fraud" (Ornstein, 1995). Some similar form of ambivalence—coming out versus remaining closeted, being oppositional versus "acting White," for example—is characteristic of all marginalized groups. And this phenomenon, like the demand for recognition, makes sense only if human identities are relatively stable.

This leaves the controversy about the self between postmodernists and transformationists quite up in the air. All interpretivists ("qualitative" researchers) are constructivists with respect to the ontology of the self: They agree that it is contingently formed and that it has no transcendent "essence." Then how do postmodernists and transformationists differ with respect to the self? The problem here is that the question of the ontology of the self cannot be viewed in the abstract. As I observed several times before, it is thoroughly entangled with epistemology. It is also thoroughly entangled with what (if anything) is adopted as the moral-political mission of social research. And it is here where the differences between postmodernists and transformationists are perhaps most perspicuous.

Political Theory

Neither transformationists nor postmodernists believe present social arrangements are just and democratic, and both seek to identify social structures and norms that serve to oppress people. Each, then, embraces "deconstruction" in this sense. What divides them is the reason for engaging in deconstruction and what comes after it.

In the extreme, deconstruction is done for its own sake, merely to challenge and disrupt the status quo. The question of how social arrangements ought to be transformed so as to better approximate social justice is dismissed, if not greeted with outright hostility. For this is the modernist project, which presupposes norms of rationality and morality around which to forge consensus. But such norms are totally ungrounded and, worse, when promoted by the powers that be, are also inherently oppressive (Ellsworth, 1992; Lyotard, 1987).

Catharine MacKinnon (1989) criticizes this brand of deconstruction on the grounds that it is nothing but playing at a "neo-Cartesian mind game" (p. 137). It goes nowhere politically, if not backwards, for it "raises acontextualized interpretive possibilities that have no real social meaning or real possibility of any, thus dissolving the ability to criticize the oppressiveness of actual meanings without making space for new ones" (1989, p. 137). Like Descartes, radical deconstructionists embrace "hyperskepticism" (Barber, 1992) as their starting point, but, unlike him, they find no "clear and distinct" moorings for knowledge. Indeed, they find no moorings at all.

Transformationists (among whom I include MacKinnon and Barber) charge that, insofar as the aim of radical deconstruction embraces the political goal of eradicating oppression, it undermines its own political project. (See also Bernstein, 1996; Gutmann, 1994; Lyon, 1994; Taylor, 1994; and Barber, 1992.) Radical deconstruction renders unanswerable the question of who the terrorized Others on the margins might be (if not unaskable), for the reality of these Others as Others evaporates under the hot lights of deconstruction. Alternatively, insofar as everyone is to be seen as marginalized, the question of who is oppressed is rendered trivial.

Transformationists concede that identities are not rigidly fixed and that prescribing a particular voice for members of marginalized groups can be condescending, stereotyping, and oppressive. As Henry Louis Gates remarks regarding the feeling he gets from his white colleagues in the academy: It is as if they were to provide him with a script and say, "Be oppositional—please. You look so cute when you're angry" (1992, p. 185). But Gates also warns against taking this observation too far. He writes:

Foucault says, and let's take him at his word, that the "homosexual" as life form was invented sometime in the 19th century. Now, if there's no such thing as a homosexual, then homophobia, at least as directed toward people rather than acts, loses its rationale. But you can't respond to the discrimination against gay people by saying, "I'm sorry, I don't exist; you've got the wrong guy." (1992, pp. 37–38)

Gates uses this example to identify a tension between what he calls "the imperatives of agency" and "the rhetoric of dismantlement." Homosexuality (or race, or gender) can be conceived of as "only a sociopolitical category," as Gates puts it. But, consistent with my observations in the previous section, that does not mean that such social categories ("constructions") do not exist or are not real in their effects. Acknowledging that members of social groups do not necessarily speak with one voice, acknowledging that identity is, as Cameron McCarthy (1993) puts it, "nonsynchronous," transformationists are on their guard to avoid sliding into the sort of radical dismantlement of group identity Gates warns against, in which all that remains are decentered, radically unstable individuals.

The flip side of the transformationists' worry about the alleged inability of radical deconstruction to make sense out of oppression is its inability to provide any guidance regarding how to educate persons so that they will be moral agents who can, among other things, recognize oppression and work against it. Daniel Dennett (1991), who rejects the Cartesian—or modernist—conception of the self in favor of a postmodernist conception, acknowledges the moral-political dangers in doing so. He thus embraces the idea of getting beyond a merely deconstructive activity to the constructive one of shaping selves of the right kind. Responding to an imagined interlocutor, Dennett writes:

I think I know what you're getting at. If a self isn't a real thing, what happens to moral responsibility? One of the most important roles of self in our traditional conceptual schemes is as the place where the buck stops, as Harry Truman's sign announced. If selves aren't real—aren't *really* real—won't the buck just get passed on and on,

round and round, forever? . . . The task of constructing a self that can take responsibility is a major social and educational project. . . . (pp. 429–430)

Nick Burbules (1996) makes a point similar to Dennett's when he observes that education is inherently about growth and development and is therefore inherently goal-directed. If Dennett and Burbules are right, it follows that however cautious educators can and ought to be about the norms, dispositions, attitudes, and knowledge they foster, foster some they must. In short, educators and educational researchers alike are required to engage in a constructive political activity.

Perhaps acknowledgment of this point explains why postmodernists in education are, by comparison to postmodernists more generally, relatively unabashed about embracing the project of ending oppression and why they are less likely to limit themselves only to deconstruction (but see Usher & Edwards, 1994). In any case, postmodern educationists appear unable to consistently confine themselves to deconstruction, and, whatever their avowals, to opt for transformation in the end.

Consider the following remark by Elisabeth Ellsworth:

[I]n a classroom in which "empowerment" is made dependent on rationalism, those perspectives that would question the political interests (sexism, racism, colonialism, for example) expressed and guaranteed by rationalism would be rejected as "irrational" (biased, partial). (1992, p. 98)

But what is the alternative to "rationalism?" As Benjamin Barber asks:

How can . . . reformers think they will empower the voiceless by proving that voice is always a function of power? . . . How do they think the struggle for equality and justice can be waged with an epistemology that denies standing to reasons and normative rational terms . . . ? (1992, p. 123)

Barber adds: "The powerful toy with reason, the powerless need it, for by definition it is their only weapon" (p. 124).

It would seem there is no way for those who would reject rationalism *carte blanche* to adequately respond to Barber's challenge. In the end, some overarching (and presumably "modernist") principle or principles must be embraced (Burbules & Rice, 1991). And Ellsworth does exactly this when she proffers the following question as the "final arbiter" for determining the "acceptability" of antiracist actions:

To what extent do our political strategies and alternative narratives about social difference succeed in alleviating campus racism, while at the same time managing *not to undercut* the efforts of other social groups to win self-definition? (1992, p. 110)

Isn't this a principle guiding political action? Doesn't it have a specific goal? Isn't it (shouldn't it be) rationally agreed to?

Consider Patti Lather's book *Getting Smart* (1991a). The subtitle, *Feminist Research and Pedagogy Within Postmodernism*, as well as much of her exposition and vocabulary, suggests she is advancing a straightforward postmodernist approach to educational research, to be distinguished from a modernist (or Enlightenment) one. But Lather explicitly denies that she em-

braces the nihilism associated with thoroughgoing deconstructionism, and she limits deconstruction to opening up space for the expression of hitherto silenced voices. In this connection, she repeatedly and approvingly cites the work of Brian Fay (1976, 1987), whose project is clearly a transformational one (however guarded and qualified).

Some self-described postmodernist educationists explicitly embrace general political principles. For example, Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux (1991) acknowledge the force of the general sort of criticism advanced by Barber. In response, they call for a "critical" (versus "apolitical") postmodernism in which the "postmodern politics of difference" is combined with the "modernist struggle for justice, equality, and freedom" (p. 194).

Here we see the line (or "border") between postmodernists and transformationists explicitly crossed. For "critical postmodernism" cannot be systematically distinguished from the so-called metanarratives of Marxism and liberalism that it putatively rejects. The "modernist struggle" continues for Marxism and liberalism, and neither tradition has remained static. On the contrary, both have evolved so as to better cope with the "politics of difference," so emphasized in postmodernist analyses.⁴

As I acknowledged in an earlier note, there are dangers in trying to divide philosophical stances taken toward the interpretive (qualitative) turn into postmodernist and transformationist. Such danger should be even more evident in light of the preceding several paragraphs. In educational theory at least, various views seem to fall on a continuum regarding the degree to which they embrace transformation. Very few shun transformation altogether.

Those I have been calling postmodernists tread very lightly. They are highly tentative about what to do in the wake of deconstruction and highly suspicious of those who claim to know what is best. They also emphasize paying very close attention to the researcher's own social position and "subjectivities." Those I have been calling transformationists do not ignore these concerns, but they are less guarded. They proceed by articulating and employing broad political principles—justice, equality, and the like—to criticize existing conditions and to suggest the direction that transformations should take.

Research Ethics

The interpretive (qualitative) turn has significant implications for the ethics of social research in general and educational research in particular. For convenience, I divide the terrain into broad versus narrow ethical obligations.

Broad (or external) ethical obligations are anchored in the broad political goals of social research, and the interpretive (qualitative) turn jettisons the positivist goal of "technical control" (Fay, 1976). Various ends (academic achievement and increased economic competitiveness, for instance) cannot be bracketed and set to one side while educational researchers go

about the task of investigating the best means, with an eye toward exerting more effective control. Ends must be left on the table, themselves remaining part of what needs to be investigated and negotiated. Postmodernists and transformationists are in substantial agreement to this point. They diverge from here, however, and their respective responses to the demise of the positivist "fact-value distinction" may be used to illustrate how.

The fact-value distinction is shorthand for a broad set of distinctions. On the fact side, it also puts rationality, science, means, cognition, objectivity, and truth. On the value side, it also puts irrationality, politics, ends, interests, subjectivity, and power. Postmodernists focus on the value side and collapse the fact side into it. Thus, we get the picture (in Foucault, for instance) that science, truth, and the like are simply masks for power. Alternatively, transformationists intermingle the fact and value sides. Thus, we get the picture (in Habermas, for instance) that, although science and truth can be corrupted—"distorted"—by power, they are nonetheless redeemable if checked by the kind of rationality associated with an emancipatory interest.

But here again the difference between postmodernists and transformationists (at least in education) may be placed on a continuum. Assume that postmodern educationists do, indeed, embrace the goal of ending oppression. This puts them in some general agreement with transformationists. Nonetheless, they may still complain that transformationists are far too confident both in how they understand this goal and the means by which it can be best achieved. It is they—the transformationists—who have a self-defeating, because overconfident, paternalistic, and oppressive, project.⁵

In my view, this sort of disagreement can but does not have to turn on fundamental philosophical questions. It may turn on strategic questions such as these: When should I bite my tongue? What's the best way to move things along? What would be the long-term consequences of intervening now? How can I get these people to see what's really going on here? Or other questions may be these: What's my stake in this? Have I failed to appreciate what's being said? Who am I to interpret this situation by my lights? And so on.

Consider these questions in light of the practice of "female circumcision." Now, consider them in light of what we know about the treatment of girls, people of color, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths by public schools. I am suggesting that, whether they have done so or not, postmodernists and transformationists could end up answering these questions in much the same way. They could end up agreeing that taking action in a certain set of circumstances would be ill-advised; they could end up agreeing that action should be taken but in the form of some tentative first steps; and so forth. Should postmodern educationists embrace the view that it is not just bad strategy to act on certain value judgments—about what is good, bad, oppressive, and should be changed—in certain circumstances but that such judgments can (ought to?) never be rendered, then

⁴ Numerous examples exist in political theory, but, for specific applications of critical theory to education, see Robert Young, 1990, and Nicholas Burbules, 1993. For an application of liberalism, see Kenneth Strike, 1991, and Kenneth Howe, 1997.

⁵ See the exchange among Giroux 1988; McLaren, 1988; and Lather, 1991b.

their view is morally and politically untenable from the transformationist's point of view. Worse, it is dangerous.

Narrow (or internal) ethical obligations are closely associated with what is typically thought of as "research ethics," for example, informed consent and confidentiality. The focus here is much more on how research subjects (participants) are to be treated within the conduct of research than on broader political goals.

Of course, the distinction between research ethics in this sense and the broader sense described above is not hard and fast. How participants are to be treated within the conduct of social research cannot be divorced from the overarching aims that that research seeks to achieve, particularly where the positivist fact-value distinction is not available to insulate the two from one another (Howe, 1992). Bearing in mind that broader ethical obligations associated with broader political-epistemological "paradigms" are always lurking in the background, there nonetheless remain ethical implications of the interpretive (qualitative) turn in educational research that may be best understood in terms of the methodological nitty-gritty of "techniques and procedures."

The techniques and procedures of interpretivist research possess two features that experimental and quasi-experimental research lack (at least lack to a relatively significant degree): intimacy and open-endedness (Howe & Dougherty, 1993). Interpretive (qualitative) research is intimate insofar as it reduces the distance between researchers and participants in the conduct of social research. Indeed, the growing preference for the term "participants" (who take an active role in "constructing social meanings") over "subjects" (who passively receive "treatments") testifies to the changed conception of relationships among human beings engaged in social research that has attended the interpretive (qualitative) turn. The face-to-face interactions associated with the pervasive techniques of interviewing and participant observation are in stark contrast to the kind of interactions required to prepare subjects for a treatment. Interpretive research is open-ended insofar as the questions and persons to which interviewing and participant observation may lead can be roughly determined only at the outset. This, too, is in stark contrast to the relatively circumscribed arena of questions and participants that characterizes experimental and quasi-experimental research.

What this means is that researchers employing qualitative techniques and procedures are (whether they want or intend to or not) likely to discover secrets and lies as well as oppressive relationships. These discoveries may put research participants at risk in ways that they had not bargained for and that the researcher had not anticipated. They may also put researchers in the position of having to decide whether they have an ethical responsibility to intervene in some way. (See, e.g., Roman, 1993.) It is for this reason that the barrier between narrow and broad ethical obligations cannot be steadfastly maintained.

Where experimental and quasi-experimental research is not identified with positivism (and I think it shouldn't be, necessarily at least. Howe, 1985, 1988, 1992), researchers in this tradition can face the same problems. For instance, things can simply fall into their laps in the process of explaining a protocol and recruiting subjects; a treatment may prove so obviously effective (or harmful) that the trial should be stopped; and so

forth. Still, the odds of facing unforeseen ethical problems are surely much higher for qualitative researchers. Generally speaking, then, qualitative research is more ethically hazardous than experimental and quasi-experimental research, and requires more careful monitoring for that reason.

Some qualitative researchers have recoiled at this suggestion, on the grounds that the current ways of thinking about and monitoring the ethics of social research are rooted in the experimentalist tradition (Murphy & Johannsen, 1990). They call for loosening or abandoning the human subjects procedures that are in place when it comes to qualitative research. Yvonna Lincoln (1990) takes this one step further by suggesting that qualitative researchers are somehow ethically in the clear because they have repudiated positivism.

Whatever benefits the interpretive (qualitative) turn has brought, I think most qualitative researchers would agree an ethically simpler life is not among them. On the contrary, qualitative researchers themselves have proposed measures that significantly complicate conducting research, such as periodic reaffirmations of consent (Cornett & Chase, 1989) and construing consent on the model of an ongoing "dialogue" (Smith, 1990). In this way, they have acknowledged the increased ethical hazards inherent in the research methods they employ. And this self-consciousness on the part of qualitative researchers is for the good, for these hazards are not going to go away.

Conclusion

Not to beat a dead horse, let me say again that the traditional philosophical debate between positivism and interpretivism—between the quantitative and qualitative "paradigms"—is over. In the wake of the interpretive turn, the philosophical debate is now between those who seek some new understandings of knowledge, rationality, truth, and objectivity (i.e., transformationists) and those who are ready to abandon these concepts as hopelessly wedded to the bankrupt modernist project (i.e., postmodernists).

Interpretivist (qualitative) educational researchers once seemed to have been much more united than they now seem to be. Perhaps their differences were simply submerged for a time, as they sought to gain legitimacy in the face of the then dominant psychological-experimental—"quantitative"—tradition. And perhaps this in turn helps explain the vague, umbrella-like nature of the term "qualitative." But to the extent this impression is accurate, it can still be only part of the story. For it is difficult to see the fracturing that has developed recently within qualitative educational research as somehow really there all along, lurking below the surface. Rather, new positions have been staked out, and feminism and postmodernism have loomed large in this development.

Disagreements among interpretivist (qualitative) educational researchers—on epistemology, ontology, politics, and ethics—are all well and good, for they spur intellectual progress. But the existence of disagreement should not obscure the three important points of agreement. First, "subjectivities" count. This is a general implication of the interpretive turn and the constructivist epistemology that goes with it. Second, social arrangements are irremediably interest-, power-, and value-laden. Accordingly, they need to be carefully examined—"decon-

structed"—in this light. And third, the result of educational research should be a more just and democratic system of schooling and, ultimately, a more just and democratic society. That is, the goal of transformation drives educational research.

To be sure, serious disagreements exist between postmodernists and transformationists. But if I am right to place these on a continuum, qualitative educational researchers of all stripes embrace both deconstruction and transformation. They would do well to avoid overblowing their differences on how to understand and balance these in a way that engenders new "paradigm cliques"—a description I once used to diagnose the quantitative-qualitative debate (Howe, 1988)—and that confuses questions about effective strategy with something more philosophically fundamental.

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