Qualitative Health Research

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What is This?

Do We Need Methodological Theory to Do Qualitative Research?

Mark Avis

Positivism is frequently used to stand for the epistemological assumption that empirical science based on principles of verificationism, objectivity, and reproducibility is the foundation of all genuine knowledge. Qualitative researchers sometimes feel obliged to provide methodological alternatives to positivism that recognize their different ethical, ontological, and epistemological commitments and have provided three theories: phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography. The author argues that positivism was a doomed attempt to define empirical foundations for knowledge through a rigorous separation of theory and evidence; offers a pragmatic, coherent view of knowledge; and suggests that rigorous, rational empirical investigation does not need methodological theory. Therefore, qualitative methodological theory is unnecessary and counterproductive because it hinders critical reflection on the relation between methodological theory and empirical evidence.

It is becoming common for qualitative researchers to identify particular approaches or traditions in qualitative inquiry. The three most often-discussed approaches are grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology, although others are also recognized (Creswell, 1998). Each of these approaches is associated with a characteristic ontology, epistemology, and methodology, and they are often associated with a particular research paradigm or conceptual scheme (Guba & Lincoln, 1988).

Although I am not against diversity, I think it is important to question whether these methodological theories are necessary to conduct qualitative research or whether, indeed, they are helpful in developing and justifying qualitative methods. In particular, I am concerned about the idea of relativizing empirical evidence to a conceptual scheme. Conceptual schemes have become embedded in our way of thinking about the relation between thought and reality. As the American philosopher Donald Davidson (1984) has put it,

> Conceptual schemes . . . are ways of organizing experience, they are systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation, they are points of view from which

> individuals, cultures or periods survey the passing scene. . . . Reality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another. (p. 183)

I acknowledge that many find such conceptual relativism an exciting and liberating doctrine, freeing empirical inquiry from the hegemony of scientific paternalism. However, I want to argue, drawing on the writings of philosophers such as Richard Rorty (1991, 1995) and Donald Davidson, that a pragmatic epistemology allows us to defend qualitative research as a rigorous and credible form of inquiry without resorting to conceptual schemes or the conceptual relativism that ensues.

THE PROBLEM OF POSITIVISM

The problem, as I see it, begins with positivism, or, at least, the use of positivism as a foil for alternative forms of inquiry. Qualitative research, and the various methodological approaches associated with it, is often founded on an explicit rejection of positivist epistemology, in particular, those positivist claims that an empirical scientific method provides the only secure foundation for knowledge. Under the influence of positivist epistemology, the scientific method became a set of rules for grounding knowledge on the evidence of the senses. These rules placed great emphasis on the use of ordered, measurement-oriented, and reproducible methods of inquiry underpinned by systematic doubt and detachment. Thus, forms of empirical inquiry whose proponents wish to advance a claim that their results lead to knowledge are obliged to ape the rules of the scientific method or provide alternatives to positivist science.

It is clear that a positivist, measurement-oriented, and rule-governed form of scientific method is unsuitable for investigations of the emergent and constructional aspects of intentional human social behavior. Therefore, it is argued that qualitative research operates within a different paradigm of inquiry, one that allows us to recognize its particular commitments and forms of research practice (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Specifically, it is suggested that a qualitative research paradigm is based on a distinctive set of assumptions about ontology—recognition of multiple social realities; epistemology—an emphasis on the subjective, insider view; and methodology as an inductive logic of inquiry, as distinct from the largely hypotheticodeductive logic of positive science (Creswell, 1998).

However, the use of positivism to provide justification for considering alternative paradigms of empirical inquiry is, in my view, fundamentally flawed. I will argue that positivism as a coherent philosophy of science became defunct about 40 years ago, and with it perished the associated idea that empirical science could be a foundation for all factual knowledge or, indeed, that there can be any clear epistemological distinction between science and other forms of inquiry. I accept that there are a considerable number of practicing scientists, some of whom seem to work in the field of medical science, who appear to behave as though positivism is alive and well. However, that is no reason for those of us who wish to show that qualitative methods are rigorous and valid, and produce credible knowledge about social reality to concur with this assumption.

KNOWLEDGE, TRUTH, AND METHODOLOGY

There are two interrelated arguments that I want to put forward in this article. A positive argument is that, properly understood, a pragmatic epistemology, as suggested by philosophers such as Davidson (1984) and Rorty (1991) over the past 20 years, allows us to propose that there are no fundamental epistemological differences between any empirical methods of inquiry, in particular between those concerned with "factual matters" and the others, which deal with subjective human experience. My negative argument is that reliance on methodological theory to justify claims that the findings of empirical inquiry contribute to knowledge might itself be an unfortunate legacy of positivism. A theory of method offers a justification for the use of particular research techniques to generate empirical evidence. I argue that a pragmatic epistemology places emphasis on the validity of the arguments put forward to justify a knowledge claim based on empirical evidence. This justification cannot be reduced to providing a coherent theory of method.

Epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge and, in particular, what justifications can be offered in support of the beliefs that we hold to be true. The classical account of knowledge is that knowledge is justified true belief. This is helpful, because it lays emphasis on the nature of justification and the means by which we can judge whether a belief is true. However, the difficulty comes in disentangling the extent to which truth is itself an epistemic concept. Realists will hold to the intuition that truth is nonepistemic, because whether a belief is true depends on whether it corresponds to reality, and so it must transcend our ability to know it. Antirealists will cling to the opposing hunch, that truth must be epistemic because an idea of truth that goes beyond our ability to know it is useless, and, therefore, truth must depend on coherence between our beliefs.

Pragmatists point out that nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief. However, they acknowledge that the truth of what is believed must be logically independent of believing it to be true, that is, we can provide objective criteria that allow us to distinguish between true and false beliefs. What pragmatists are concerned to reject is the empty realist intuition that the test for the truth of a belief must involve checking whether it corresponds with a mind-independent reality. They argue that it is meaningless to conceive of our beliefs as representing reality, or that a test of truth could depend on a confrontation between our beliefs and reality. Davidson (2001) has argued, "Beliefs are true or false, but they represent nothing. It is good to be rid of representations, and with them the correspondence theory of truth, for it is thinking that there are representations that engenders intimations of relativism" (p. 46). A pragmatic epistemology suggests that the purpose of empirical inquiry is something closer to providing justification for our beliefs.

QUINE AND THE COLLAPSE OF VERIFICATIONISM

My first step in arguing that a pragmatic epistemology means an end to the epistemological distinctions made between science and other forms of empirical

inquiry will be to exploit the arguments that Quine (1953) first used so elegantly more than 40 years ago to dispose of positivism as the epistemology of empirical science. The power of positivism as an epistemology rested on its verificationism. Verificationism was a means by which beliefs, or, more correctly, sentences expressing beliefs, could be given meaning by reducing them to the confirmatory sense experiences that could determine their truth. In short, the meaning of a sentence was the method for discovering if it was true; if no method could be given for determining a sentence's truth, then that sentence was meaningless. Verificationism offered an economical and apparently robust epistemology. If the confirmatory sense experiences for a particular sentence could be produced, then we would have a justification for believing that the sentence was true and, therefore, adequate grounds for knowledge. Furthermore, verificationism allows specification of the empirical, factual conditions that would justify a particular belief, and these empirical conditions can be cashed out in terms of rigorous rules for the generation of evidence, rules that include quantification, reproducibility, and objectivity. As Rorty (1999) has pointed out, on such a view, empirical science, based on positivist epistemology, becomes the model of rational inquiry through its use of instrumental reason and ordered procedures.

However, Quine (1953) demonstrated that verificationism depended on two unsustainable assumptions: reductionism and the distinction between analytic and synthetic truths. Reductionism held that each meaningful sentence or proposition must be reducible to empirical evidence, usually provided by the senses, or to a logical law. The distinction between analytic and synthetic truths held that some statements are true simply because of meanings of the terms they contain, and some sentences are true because of the way the world is. For example, it is an analytic truth that all bachelors are unmarried; on the other hand, it would be a synthetic truth that all bachelors are misogynist. The blow that Quine struck against verificationism was to show that it was impossible to fix the empirical content, and hence the meaning, of a sentence in isolation from other sentences. In effect, he argued that there could be no determinate empirical content of a single sentence. In two exhilarating pages in his classic article "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," Quine showed how this conclusion overturns positivist empiricism. He began the final section as follows:

> The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience . . . But, the total field is so underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to re-evaluate in the light of any single contrary experience . . . If this view is right, it is misleading to speak of the empirical content of an individual statement—especially if it is a statement at all remote from the experiential periphery of the field. Furthermore, it becomes folly to seek a boundary between synthetic statements, which hold contingently on experience, and analytic statements, which hold come what may. Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system. (pp. 42-43)

THEORY CONTEXT OF EMPIRICAL
EVIDENCE AND THE INDETERMINACY OF THEORY

There are two consequences of Quine's epistemological pragmatism that I want to highlight. First, sense experience, and by implication all empirical evidence, cannot be separated from theory in any nonarbitrary sense. Even the most seemingly basic observation statements "I observe a flashing red light" or "I feel angry" are theory dependent and therefore revisable in the light of changes in theoretical context. Quine's holistic view of knowledge and his claim that no belief, rule, or logical law is immune from revision imply that we must accept that interpretation of the contents of experience depends on the application of theory. In return, theory depends on sense experience for meaning and testing. It is misguided to think that theory can be given meaning by reference to uninterpreted sense experience. Equally, it is misleading to imagine that we can separate empirical evidence from the totality of associated theory, which allows us to interpret an array of sensory promptings as ordered patterns of experience. There can be no theory-neutral observation language and no prereflective understanding, nor can theory be given determinate meaning by reference to individual empirical observations. It is worth noting that Quine's argument effectively rebuts the point of Popper's (1959) falsificationism as well. Quine's position implies that we can continue to hold any theory true in the face of contrary evidence if we are willing to make revisions elsewhere in our system of beliefs. Consequently, there is no reason to support Popper's view that a logic of inquiry based on falsificationism separates science from other forms of intellectual activity. However, Popper does raise the important issue that our theories must be answerable to the evidence in some way. It is an important observation that a theory or belief that cannot be subjected to critical inquiry, which could show it to be untrue, is dogma or a matter of faith.

The second consequence of Quine's pragmatic epistemology is an acknowledgement that verification based on reductionism cannot provide a secure foundation for empirical epistemology. Indeed, the entire metaphor of empirical science's providing a firm foundation for factual knowledge by securing it to the solid ground of sense experience sentence by sentence turns out to be unsustainable. The metaphor we should be using is that knowledge is more like a boat at sea; what keeps it afloat in a sea of possible sense experience is the interconnectedness of its planks. The ability of the boat to stay afloat derives from the links between the planks; however, we are able to change the configuration of the planks while still remaining afloat (as long as we do not try to change all the planks at the same time).

These two consequences of the collapse of positivism support a holism thesis: Individual beliefs have content and meaning only in the context of a dense background of other beliefs, and it is the totality of our knowledge that provides the background to any knowledge claim. Decisions about what beliefs to accept can be made not by appeal to the facts through verification but on a pragmatic basis of what makes the best sense of our total experience and system of beliefs. Pragmatists urge that we need to free ourselves from the story that the purpose of empirical inquiry is the growth of knowledge that attempts to represent the world, or

scientific inquiry is a quest after objective truths, which are "out there" waiting to be discovered. We have no means of stepping outside our pattern of beliefs to check them against a mind-independent reality. However, we must acknowledge that it is our interactions with the world that causes us to have certain beliefs. The slogan for a pragmatic view of inquiry is best given by Davidson (2001): "All that counts as evidence or justification for a belief must come from the same totality of belief to which it belongs" (p. 155).

THE SKEPTICAL THREAT FOR HOLISM

The holism thesis appears to pose an unwelcome dilemma. Either there is no defense against the skeptic who points out that we can never insure against the possibility that the majority of our beliefs are consistent but false or, on the alternative horn of the dilemma, against the relativist who argues that we could have competing bodies of beliefs that amount to different and yet internally consistent conceptual schemes.

The latter route has been followed by Kuhn (1962) and many others to show that once we accept that there is no theory-neutral observation language to provide a secure foundation for knowledge, the possibility is open that we could have systems of beliefs and theories that amount to self-contained but incompatible world views or paradigms. Kuhn's analysis of the evolution of science suggests that the acceptance of a dominant scientific theory is contingent on social and political forces and that the history of science has been marked by radical switches between incommensurable scientific theories. Many have used his notion of incommensurability between systems of beliefs to argue that knowledge and truth are relative to a paradigm or a conceptual scheme. This thought has caught hold in many areas of inquiry that have been concerned to free empirical inquiry from the hegemony of the scientific method and to open up the possibility that social realities can be known only from within the discourses or shared interests that make them apparent (Barnes, 1974; Feyerabend, 1975; Harding, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Lyotard, 1984). Social constructionism established the idea that social realities are constructed through the processes of social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). There is no objective social ontology; each social group or subculture could have its own conceptual scheme, which can be understood only from within.

I argue that a pragmatic epistemology will encourage us to draw back from the brink of the conclusion either that truth and knowledge are relative to a paradigm or that the majority of our beliefs could be false. The skeptic and relativist are both exploiting the notion of a conceptual scheme: We could have a consistent system of beliefs that organizes our sense experience into coherent patterns but that is false or incommensurable.

WHY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH OFFERS A WAY OUT OF CONCEPTUAL SCHEME RELATIVISM

One means of resolving this dilemma is to consider the way in which qualitative researchers face the challenge of making sense of other people and other cultures.

Our purpose in qualitative inquiry is to reveal the interrelationships between individual beliefs, cultural norms, and social rules, and to do so in a way that makes beliefs and values of other cultures intelligible against a background of shared assumptions about the world. However, qualitative researchers must achieve this while recognizing that the meaning of sentences spoken by other peoples cannot be determined in isolation from the pattern of beliefs that they hold or by reference to empirical conditions. The challenge is to produce something like an interpretation manual that makes the behavior of other peoples intelligible without assuming a prior understanding of their idiomatic languages or their constellation of beliefs, and without using notions such as the "facts of the situation" to decide what is meant by social behavior in a context, because it is not clear what these facts might be.

The American anthropologist Ward Goodenough (1967) has suggested two criteria for judging the quality of an interpretation manual. Anthropological knowledge can be defined as what has to be learned to understand events in another community as its members understand them and to act in ways that those people will accept as conforming to their expectations of one another. This seems helpful because it provides objective criteria for performance success. These criteria can be related to Wittgenstein's (1953) famous argument about rule following. He argued that the concept of following a rule depends on shared criteria on what counts as following a rule correctly and incorrectly. An individual might be adamant that he is following a rule correctly, but if others cannot grasp that rule, then he cannot be said to be following a rule at all. Wittgenstein offered an idea of how knowledge can be objective by suggesting that there are intersubjective standards by which we could determine if we have gotten things right and for carrying on correctly.

It seems to me that the version of anthropological inquiry and the criteria for success offered by Goodenough (1967) are essentially pragmatic. They involve detailing what people of another culture know by describing what outsiders would have to learn to understand them and act consistently with their norms, given due recognition of the point that individual beliefs can be identified only within a dense pattern of beliefs. The only way in which qualitative researchers could identify the beliefs that must be learned for them to think and act consistently in a new culture is to start from the assumption that they share a substantial number of beliefs with the people they are trying to understand. Interpreting the behavior of others depends on attributing to others many of our own beliefs; otherwise, we could not individuate or identify the new beliefs that would have to be learned. The consequence of this point can be illustrated by examining the argument that Davidson (1984) used to disentangle the interdependence of meaning and belief. He imagined how we would go about interpreting utterances spoken by native speakers in an unknown language. He suggested that we would employ a principle of charity, which encourages us to interpret their behavior as exhibiting a constellation of beliefs about the world that not only makes their behavior consistent but that is largely in agreement with our own. If we are unable to make these attributions stick, then there is little reason to think they are expressing beliefs, behaving intentionally, using reason, or even speaking a language. Davidson's principle of charity and the pragmatic criterion for identifying those beliefs, which we need to understand and act consistently in another culture, are epistemically related. As Davidson has pointed out, "The basic claim is that much community of belief is needed to provide a basis for communication or understanding; the extended claim should then be that objective error can occur only in a setting of largely true belief" (p. 200).

The point is that charity is forced on us by the requirements of interpreting someone as speaking a language. Among the key observations that Wittgenstein (1953) made are that having beliefs depends on having language and that the use of language to communicate beliefs depends on objective criteria about employing language correctly or incorrectly. In using language to communicate beliefs about the world, we employ an assumption that language cannot "swing free" of the world in a way that would undermine the attribution of recognizable beliefs and attitudes regarding the truth and falsity of our sentences to other speakers. The fact that we can and do successfully interpret the language and behavior of other peoples using something analogous to the principle of charity casts doubt on the idea that people could be living in different realities or that conceptual schemes could organize our experience into consistent but incommensurable patterns. Davidson (1984) concluded,

> In giving up dependence on the concept of uninterpreted reality, something outside all schemes and science, we do not give relinquish the notion of objective truth—quite the contrary. Given the dogma of scheme and reality, we get conceptual relativity and truth relative to a scheme. Without the dogma, this kind of relativity goes by the board. Of course truth of sentences remains relative to a language, but this is as objective as can be. (p. 198)

Goodenough's (1967) pragmatic criteria for anthropological knowledge depend on the implicit use of a principle of charity by the qualitative researcher in the act of interpretation. The principle of charity disarms the skeptic and the relativist by taking away the wedge that they use to drive apart our beliefs and reality to argue that our systems of beliefs could turn out to be false or that we could have incommensurable conceptual schemes. This conclusion is related to Habermas's (1986) notion of universal pragmatics as a basis for consensus and a general theory of social action; however, I argue that the principle of charity avoids an appeal to an idealized epistemic position to justify knowledge claims. On the pragmatic view that I have been advancing, there is no need to maintain the idea that reality is "out there" to be discovered or that our knowledge represents reality. Reality is as much constructed as it is found. However, without the dogma of incommensurable conceptual schemes, we find that reality is something on which we can agree or disagree with other people. If knowledge does not represent reality, then the questions posed by the realist, the skeptic, and the relativist about the relation between knowledge and reality become meaningless. The purpose of inquiry, according to Rorty (1999), concerns the pragmatic development of better ways of living rather than achieving better descriptions of mind independent reality:

> We should see inquiry as a means of using reality. So the relation between our truth claims and the rest of the world is causal rather than representational. It causes us to hold beliefs, and we continue to hold beliefs which prove to be reliable guides to getting what we want. (p. 33)

Once we give up the assumption of conceptual scheme and content waiting to be organized, then there is nothing left to defend in terms of the conceptual scheme of science or its alternatives.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WITHOUT METHODOLOGICAL THEORY

I think that as empirical researchers, we must take seriously Quine's (1953) arguments that the meaning of a belief is not given by an individual theory or sense experience, and that the truth of any empirical claim can be judged only against the totality of our knowledge. As an empirical researcher, I also have to acknowledge that science has proven to be a remarkably fertile means of generating successful explanations and predictions about the world. However, I do not need to accept that a scientific method based on verificationism offers any sort of epistemic assurance that the human mind is able to get in touch with reality. Once we set aside this empty claim, I suggest, a pragmatic epistemology offers us a more conducive picture of knowledge because it emphasizes the relation between knowledge and justification and allows us to claim that the outcomes of other forms of empirical inquiry can also lead to knowledge. A pragmatic epistemology places great emphasis on validity and forms of justification as the real epistemological concerns of empirical inquiry. The results of empirical inquiry add to our body of knowledge insofar as the epistemological claims are internally consistent and deal with the relationship between theory and evidence in an open, self-critical, and holistic manner.

A pragmatic view of knowledge allows us to disentangle methodology from epistemology and to separate claims about the validity of evidence from the validity of arguments that the findings of empirical inquiry lead to knowledge. Although the former claims might help in establishing the latter, the validity of claims that empirical inquiry has added to knowledge cannot be reduced to a demonstration that the evidence has been generated through the application of rules and procedures derived from a coherent methodological theory. Methodological justification concerns the rationale given for the characteristic techniques used in the production of empirical evidence within a particular research tradition. Epistemological justification depends on the internal consistency of the arguments put forward to support a knowledge claim based on the fit between the evidence, social theory, and existing knowledge. This justification must include critical reflection on the social roles and values of the research team, the social processes of generating evidence, the role of substantive social theory in conceptualizing the evidence, and how the evidence fits with background theory. Established methodological theories provide some conventional ways of handling these issues, but they are limited in the scope they offer for critical reflection on the role of social theory in the production of evidence and in the extent to which they provide for new or unusual forms of research technique.

I am concerned that methodological theories are being used to justify qualitative research methods in a way that obscures the internal consistency of the epistemological arguments and that fails to locate knowledge claims within a wider system of beliefs. In constructing an epistemological justification for a claim that the findings of qualitative inquiry have contributed to knowledge, it is not sufficient to state, "This study used grounded theory to generate its findings" or "This study employed phenomenological methods." The purpose of intellectual inquiry, surely, is to stimulate dialogue between people and to subject their ideas and evidence to critical scrutiny. Given that all evidence arises within the context of surrounding theory, intellectual debate should be about getting theories into conversation with

each other to enlarge the possibilities of agreement. Where we can do this, we are expanding possibilities for knowledge. All too often, phenomenology, grounded theory, or ethnography are used to justify a series of steps or procedures that have been followed to produce evidence in a way that closes off critical scrutiny of the evidence by locating it as internal to a particular methodological theory. I am not arguing that methodological theories are not useful and productive in generating new insights into social behavior. I am pointing out that we can do qualitative research without this kind of theory and that treating these methodological theories as matters of faith to which we must adhere to assure a justifiable knowledge claim is not helpful in outlining the rationale for the use of qualitative methods. What I am suggesting is that all researchers, qualitative or otherwise, need to give greater attention to the validity of their epistemological arguments by considering the nature and provenance of empirical evidence and the role of theory in generating that evidence.

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