

Qualitative Inquiry, ethics and the politics of evidence: Working within these spaces rather than being worked over by them

Julianne Cheek

Professor and Director: Centre for Research into Sustainable Health Care, University of South Australia

Guest Professor: Institute for Nursing and Health Sciences, University of Oslo
julianne.cheek@unisa.edu.au

Author's note: This was a plenary address presented at the Second International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, May 4-6, 2006, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

ABSTRACT

Just as qualitative research is “endlessly creative and interpretative” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), qualitative researchers find themselves in the position of having to be endlessly creative and interpretive with respect to the various spaces they move in and out of as they conceptualize, conduct, write and report their research. Two such spaces are new and mutated forms of “old” regimes of truth based in audit culture, and refracted forms of methodological fundamentalism and imperialism emanating from without, but significantly also increasingly within, writing and talking about qualitative research. Navigating and moving in and out of these spaces creates tensions but also possibilities for qualitative researchers. This article aims to encourage a focus on better understanding these spaces, and how qualitative researchers do and might, work within and on these spaces. As Bauman (2000) points out “To work in the world, as distinct from being ‘worked out and about’ by it, one needs to know how the world works”. This applies to the aspects of our worlds that we call qualitative inquiry, ethics and the politics of evidence.

Introduction

This article aims to explore some of the spaces that have been created for, and are being created by, the confluence and at times collision between qualitative inquiry, ethics and the politics of evidence and how we as a community of qualitative researchers can position ourselves in order to work within and on these spaces. The imprimatur to a large extent for the approach that I am adopting emanated from the very wide observation made by Zygmunt Bauman (2000, p. 86) that “to *work* in the world (as distinct from being ‘worked out and about’ by it) one needs to know how the world works.”

So what are some observations about these spaces? First, we increasingly find ourselves in contexts that are replete with paradoxes. On the one hand our worlds – for there are many that we simultaneously inhabit – have never been more uncertain, fragmentary and in many ways, to use a term of Judith Butler (2004): “precarious”. For example if we work in the university system we are faced with different forms of this uncertainty in the way that administrators and

governments alike clamour and constantly drive change in the quest for ensuring value for money and quality and excellence in education. This creates an environment in which I find myself constantly wondering where the next reform will come from and what form it will take. The paradox lies in the fact that this uncertainty derives from the quest on the part of these bodies to establish certainty with respect to measures and assurances of quality and excellence (the buzz words). The more we try to attain certainty the more uncertain things become!

In Australia, for example, we have decided to go the route of a Research Quality Framework. This reflects the outworking of the steady rise of audit culture and the neo-liberal derived government agenda to ensure value for money in terms of investment in research (Cheek, 2006). Herein lies another paradox of course in that neo liberal influenced governments would have us believe that the principles of the marketplace, competition and enterprise are paramount, yet as Barry, Osborne and Rose (1996, p.10) pointed out some 10 years ago, neo-liberal thought is productive of a range of apparatuses and technologies designed to “*actively* create the conditions within which entrepreneurial and competitive conduct is possible”. In other words it is a form of bounded or delimited entrepreneurship or market.

It is this notion of bounded or delimited entrepreneurship or the market that I think is particularly pertinent to this discussion. I think that one way of thinking about the spaces we find ourselves pushed and pulled in in relation to qualitative inquiry, ethics and evidence is as spaces in which we experience the paradox of delimited autonomy as researchers and scholars. We experience frustration and at times are perplexed as we rub up against the boundaries and as the boundaries themselves shift and change as they too are impacted on by the wider political context.

One of the major contemporary influences creating uncertainty and also permeability in these boundaries with respect to the injection of new forms of enterprise and competitive rhetoric is a resurgence of neo positivist influenced and derived approaches to research. We now see new forms of combinations of methodological fundamentalism and understandings of evidence, ethics and research inquiry emerging within these spaces as they are colonized by discourses such as the evidence based movement and new and mutated understandings about and associated technologies of measures of both research and research outcomes. Influenced by and also influencing (for we must not forget the dynamic that is in operation here) are technologies providing the scaffolding for these spaces and these technologies include ethics committees, review panels for both journals and funding schemes, and dissertation examining panels. In these uncertain spaces, certainty is sought by new forms of surveillance of both researchers and researcher’s activities. For example, research activity is subject to, and object of, cascading levels of scrutiny and examination designed to compare, rank and identify deficits. Certainty in terms of the quality and impact of research is sought with metrics emerging as one certain way to do so. By metrics I mean the emergence of numerical measures of publication quality such as impact factor of journals and number of citations, and amount of dollars gained for funding.

Recently the UK, home of the RAE which has strongly influenced the RQF discussion in Australia, has flagged the demise of the RAE and its replacement by a metric base system of funding allocation for research performance which the UK Chancellor Gordon Brown described as radically simplifying the process. A statement from the treasury in March of this year (it is interesting that it is this department issuing the directives and statements about measures of research quality and excellence) reported in the press states “In May 2006, the government will launch a consultation on its preferred option for a metrics based system for assessing research quality and allocating QR funding...the 2008 RAE should go ahead, incorporating a shadow metrics exercise alongside the traditional panel-based peer review system...However, if an alternative system is agreed and widely supported, and a clear majority of UK universities were to favour an earlier move to a *simpler* system, the government would be willing to consider that” (MacLeod 2006; *Emphasis added*). At the same time with a change of minister in Australia the proposed RQF is undergoing review and one of the strong possibilities is a move towards a much more metrics based system. What is lost sight of in all this is the uncertain premises on which such touted certain metric measures are built.

For example, we know that supposed objective metrics such as citation rates and journal impact factors are influenced by assumptions both philosophical and technical that are not necessarily related to the scientific quality of the articles (Cheek, Garnham & Quan, 2006). Yet despite the fact that impact factor “has serious limitations, is being misapplied and has unwanted consequences” (Boch and Walter 2001, p563) its use globally by governments, granting councils and promotions and appointment committees is being promulgated. Indeed some ethics committees are being colonized by such understandings to the extent that ethical research in terms of research that has benefit is being conflated with research that produces publications of high quality (i.e. read high impact). Thus a further delimited space of autonomy is produced for researchers. Within those spaces are material apparatuses that form part of an audit culture and reflect particular understandings of research and research outcomes.

These are just one aspect of spaces that reflect and contribute to the tensions, contradictions and hesitations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) that affect both qualitative research and those who carry out this research. We are seeing relentless colonization of spaces we occupy as qualitative researchers by new and refracted forms of “old” issues including the eternal quest for how to assess quality and establish impact of research, how to determine what is good and useful research, what constitutes evidence of impact and quality of research and what is ethical research and how the ethics of research relates to this.

Working within and on these spaces: Posing the hard questions in order to know how these spaces work

So how to work in these spaces rather than being worked over them or as Bauman (2005) put it “worked out and about” by them. Well I think the starting point is to try to understand and to deeply think about how these spaces work and what these spaces are. This is part of the call for hesitation alluded to previously. In a very small and limited way I have attempted to show how we might do this in relation to some aspects of these spaces we as researchers find ourselves in the earlier part of this article. But understanding the spaces is not enough. What ac-

tion are we going to take? What positions are we going to adopt? Importantly what are positions that we might adopt? In order to explore working within these spaces the remainder of this article explores a number of questions that I think highlight the sorts of things that we might usefully look at. I have chosen these questions because they are ones that I don't have the/an answer for and because they are ones that are troubling and perplexing me. In this sense I think that it is the *questions* that are actually the important thing more so than the answers. Posing these questions exposes the multiple, competing and even at times contradictory positions/spaces we find ourselves in. Indeed, the more that I think about these things the less I am sure that I actually know!

That said, the only thing I am certain about is that now is the time for us to go further than just acknowledging that these spaces exist. We are working in what I consider to be uncertain, fragmented, and precarious times for qualitative researchers. In many ways we have made many gains but at the same time the paradox is that more than any other time I think we could find ourselves in a period of massive backlash in spaces that are potentially and actually hostile, for example the 'dangerous discourses' referred to by Lincoln and Cannella (2004) such as the return to high modernism, backlash against diverse forms of research and direct government intervention and actions. And what is new about this is that some of these spaces are emerging *within* qualitative research itself as we seek to survive in this environment – I will elaborate on this in what follows.

Question one: How do we want excellence in qualitative research to be defined? The funding dollars we are granted, the changes our research influences among our participants, the types of papers that we write or something else or all of the above? Is it possible that we will see the emergence of new forms of methodolatory within qualitative research as we grapple with demands to justify and provide "certain ways" to measure excellence and impact of our research? This is a really difficult space that I find myself in as I sit on panels to award funding and members who have little understanding of qualitative research (but who vote none the less) ask me for guides or checklists to determine how to score or assess qualitative proposals. What are we going to do about this and how? Already there are the beginnings of a debate about this in the literature but I think there is a need for a fuller and more robust debate about this issue and possibly the need for a more unified and consistent approach to this. However, as I say this I am aware that this is creating tensions for me in that once we do this, will it preclude and exclude or marginalize other forms of qualitative research including emergent ones as well? If we think that we can avoid this, that this a passing phase - then we may need to think again – the trend towards metrics and the desire for certainty that I have alluded to in the spaces that I find myself make this impossible for me to ignore. My position as Chair of one of these committees puts me in the position of being part of the scaffolding that is supporting these boundaries creating the spaces in which we operate. Yet if we don't define excellence then perhaps someone else will and then we really will be worked over in these spaces. In such a scenario we run the risk of colonization of our spaces by metrics determined by others and the emergence of a form of politically correct qualitative research. However, if we do define excellence/ try to grapple with a metric derived system for evaluating our research, then

have we been worked over by these spaces anyway? I don't know the answer but at the very least we need to be writing and speaking about these things.

Question 2: How, in what I believe is a fundamentally conservative context, do we keep the critical/risky edge on qualitative research that has been its hallmark and to some extent its contribution to many of our participants? If we are in spaces where metrics are going to become of increasing import then how can we ensure that radical and diverse politics and research is valued? As editors or editorial board members what do we do in terms of the journals where we know we are more likely to be able to publish this type of work? Should they all have impact factors? Perhaps it is time for us as qualitative researchers to talk as much about processes and reviews as it is about methods and theories? When as individuals we publish, what things do we think about when deciding what and where to publish? Should we subvert the process by ensuring we inflate the impact factors of our journals, or do we ignore the whole thing, running the risk that our journals are only ever categorized as second or third tier? Does that matter? Or put another way, how do we navigate/reconcile/transcend what it might be useful to think of as the politics of excellence and the criteria for visibility especially with respect to performance? Are excellence and visibility the same thing anyway?

Question 3: What does this mean in terms of the politicization of qualitative research and the qualitative research community itself? Do we need to be creating new forms of co-operative and collective communities of qualitative researchers that can take a stance on some of these issues and which can help individual isolated or less powerful researchers who are buffeted relentlessly in the spaces that they find themselves in, and who seek support in these spaces? Do we need to become more strategic about this and if so who and how? Is there a need for some form of championing of qualitative research and if so in what contexts, by whom and how? How do we identify "experts" and "expertise" in qualitative research if asked to for panels or government advisory committees? Or would this mean selling out on some of the very things that drew us to qualitative research in the first place?

Question 4: Is all of this challenging the very notion of qualitative research being an identifiable field and one that holds us together as a community? Is it qualitative research that we have in common or has the term become so contested and diverse now that it has almost lost meaning as some form of unifying or identifiable overarching construct? Are we seeing the possibility of the fracturing of what once we would have referred to as qualitative research into different forms and versions with different emphases, or combinations of emphases, such as on "purity" of method, explication of theoretical influences, a vehicle to gain funding, a way of producing dissertations, contributing to social justice, so that it might be argued that some forms/outworkings of qualitative research endeavours have more in common with other fields than with qualitative research per se. For example, do some forms of qualitative research that are funded run the risk of having to be reduced to atheoretical techniques that have more in common with traditional positivist notions of research and research methods than understandings of qualitative research as a philosophically and theoretically informed endeavour? Is the notion of qualitative research as something we can all understand no longer applicable in light of the spaces we find ourselves in and the different emphases in those spaces?

Can we find some common ground that enables us to still think of qualitative research as a useful unifying concept albeit one that is necessarily heterogeneous and importantly always open to contestation? Does it matter?

A time to hesitate

To conclude what has necessarily been an introductory look at these issues, I am convinced that there is a need to think deeply about the spaces we find ourselves in. Unless we better understand how we both are positioned and in turn position ourselves in these spaces then there is the very real possibility that we will be worked over by the spaces rather than working in them and *importantly on them*. It is not so much the choices we make or the answers that we give that are my prime focus or concern. Rather it is the *reasons* for those choices that need to be surfaced, made explicit, opened up to examination and contested. This is a call to new forms of activism, ones that focus on tensions operating *within* the field (I struggled for the right word here) we have historically known as qualitative research as much as they do on forces or tensions operating on that field from without.

In so doing this is a call for hesitation with respect to how we think about the spaces we find ourselves in, how we work within these spaces, and how we might work on them. Otherwise there is absolutely no doubt in my mind – the only certain statement I will make – we will increasingly find ourselves worked over by them.

References

- Barry, A, Osborne, T & Rose, N (eds.) 1996, *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-liberalism, and Rationalities of Government*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Bauman, Z 2000, 'On Writing: On writing Sociology', *Theory Culture & Society*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 79-90.
- Butler, J 2004, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, London.
- Cheek, J 2006, 'The Challenge of Tailor Made Research Quality: The RQF in Australia', *Qualitative Inquiry and the Conservative Challenge: Contesting Methodological Fundamentalism*, Left Coast Press, California.
- Cheek, J Garnham, B & Quan, J 2006, 'What's in a number? Issues in providing evidence of impact and quality of research(ers)', *Qualitative Health Research*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 423-435.
- Denzin, N & Lincoln, YS 2005, 'Preface', in N Denzin & YS Lincoln (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd edn), Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.
- Lincoln, YS & Cannella, GS 2004, 'Dangerous Discourses: Methodological Conservatism and Governmental Regimes of Truth', *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 10, no.1, pp. 5-14.
- MacLeod, D 2006, 'Research exercise to be scrapped', *Education Guardian*, 22 March, viewed 24 April 2006, <http://education.guardian.co.uk/RAE/story/0,,1737082,00.html>