DEWEY AND THE QUALITATIVE

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Qualitative research in education apparently has come of age. There is a growing recognition that quantitative study, though important, does not do justice to the complexity of human reality. As a consequence, new courses, new programs, and new line items for qualitative researchers are appearing in colleges of education. At the University of Florida, for example, we recently approved a 12-hour qualitative research track for doctoral students. Three qualitative research methods courses are offered in the college and three more can be taken in the departments of Anthropology and Sociology and in the College of Nursing. We will offer a new graduate course in Qualitative Educational Psychology in the fall of 1987. In January 1988, The International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education will be launched, sponsored by the University of Florida and published by Taylor and Francis in London. Two issues of the Journal of Thought recently were devoted to qualitative research methods.[1] The articles in these issues, together with previously unpublished material, will be published in book form by Falmer Press in 1988.[2]

Despite the new enthusiasm for qualitative research, there is as yet no agreed-upon meaning for the term "qualitative research." Most of us use the phrase as a synonym for a specific research methodology, usually ethnography. Such narrowness not only drums out of the qualitative corps a small legion of time-honored methods, but it also prohibits inquiry into the nature of qualitative study. Such an inquiry might reveal that all qualitative methods have some important things in common. Ethnography, history, biography, life history, social philosophy, curriculum criticism, critical theory, phenomenography, literary criticism, and other qualitative methods certainly are different from

one another. But there may be an underlying unity in this variety that tells us some important things about educational research.

In order to explore this possibility, we have asked a number of experts to discuss specific forms of qualitative research in the issues of the Journal of Thought cited above. Each clarified the nature and process of their method, discussed what it had contributed to the study of education, and explained what made the method distinctively qualitative. We believe that seven characteristics can be found in every qualitative research methodology:

- First, all qualitative methods resist the "context stripping" that characterize so much of positivistic social science.
- Second, the contexts described and analyzed in qualitative research are not contrived or modified, but are natural and must be taken as they are found. Social contexts are not predefined by researchers and findings are not forced into preestablished categories. Further, most qualitative methods are non-interventionist.
- Third, attention is given to the socially constructed reality of actors in their natural settings. There is an interest in the mundane, quotidian, taken-for-granted nature of everyday life.
- Fourth, qualitative research deals unashamedly with human experience.

Our last three characteristics can be more easily explained by turning to John Dewey's work for illustration. Dewey accused positivistic social science of having an unreasonable "devotion to physical science as a model, and a misconception of physical science at that." He pointed out the difference between physical and social facts. A fact in the physical sciences, he said, ". . . is the ultimate residue after human purposes, desires, emotions, ideas and ideals have been systematically excluded. A social fact, on the other hand, is a concretion in external form of precisely these human factors."[3] Dewey contends that human experience must be studied in context, as a whole. This means that experience must be understood in the context of a situation and that situations, in turn, must be understood in the context of a larger institutional and

cultural setting. In our inquiry, the fifth characteristic of qualitative research was a devotion to whole-ism.

Capturing experience whole-istically, i.e., in context, is a tricky business, entailing as Geertz has stated:

> . . . a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local details and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring both into view simultaneously. . . . Hopping back and forth between the whole, conceived through the parts which actualize it, and the parts, conceived through the whole which motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another.[4, 5]

Qualitative research provides methods that guide inquiry into human experience and, as Richard Bernstein notes, guard against:

> . . . facilely projecting our own well-entrenched beliefs, attitudes, classifications, and symbolic forms onto . . . alien phenomenon. While this is an art that requires patience, imagination, attention to detail, and insight--and cannot be completely captured by the specification of rules and procedure--it is certainly a rational activity in which we can discriminate better and worse understandings and interpretations of the phenomenon.[6]

Bernstein has also noted that the major differences between positivistic science and qualitative disciplines "lies precisely in the attitude that the practicing scientist takes toward the history of his discipline."[7] Quantitative research has a short shelf life. Few things are as uninteresting or as useless as an out-of-date report from the quantitative sciences. As Kuhn has stated, "Unlike art, science destroys its past."[8] The old discovery must always give way to the new breakthrough. The education of the natural scientist dwells in the present, in today's knowledge and speculations. Good qualitative research, on the other hand, has enduring value, and the education of a qualitative researcher demands attention to the history of his or her discipline. Think of what we are still learning (and wish others would learn) from such books as Callahan's Education and the Cult of Efficiency, Waller's Sociology of Teaching, the Lynd's Middletown studies, Hollingshead's Elmtown's Youth, and Dewey's Democracy and Education.

To sum up, the sixth characteristic of all qualitative methods is that they seek to discover possibilities in experience, and the patterns or relationships among events. Seventh, and finally, all qualitative methods contain elements of judging and appraising. Their aim is to give an appraisal of the qualitative situation, the parts and the whole, and an indication of the particularity that may lie in the actualities. This should enable the researcher to recommend something to do, or to try, in dealing further with the qualitative situation. These seven similarities are important, but they do not take us deep enough into the meaning of qualitative.

For a more complete understanding, we consulted Dewey, not in an effort to simply repeat his views, but as a source of insight. Dewey understood that social science must study the taken-for-granted world of everday life, "the world in which we immediately live." That world, said Dewey, ". . . is pre-eminently . . . qualitative."[9] The unity that defines the character of a culture, an institution, a personality, a work of art, or a situation is fundamentally qualitative. In Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, Dewey gives a useful example of what he means by qualitative unity.

> A painting is said to have quality, or a particular painting is said to have . . . a Rembrandt quality. The word [quality] does not refer to any particular line, color or part of the painting. It . . . modifies all the constituents of the picture and all their relations.[10]

That is to say, the task of social science is to render intelligible the qualitative unity that gives a person, an event, an institution, or a culture its own pervasive character. We must discover and then spell out the unique quality that gives meaning to a Rembrandt painting, a Blake poem, a Hemingway novel, the Civil War, a motorcycle gang, a democratic workplace, or an effective school. This list suggests that we want to lower the barriers that presently separate the humanities from the social sciences.

The quality of a social situation, personality, or institution is not readily apparent or easily discovered. It is invisible, yet it permeates every detail, thought, and action. As Dewey explained:

> The underlying unity of qualitativeness regulates the pertinence or relevancy and force of every distinction and relation; it guides selection and rejection and the manner of utilization of all explicit terms. We are aware of it, not by itself, but as the background, the thread, and the distinctive clue in [everything we think and do].[11]

Social scientists have difficulty finding the qualitative unity in social settings because the qualitative dimension of those settings cannot easily be expressed from within. The qualitative is lodged in the patterns of a culture and in the pre-reflective habits of a personality.[12] People are not usually aware of the qualitative unity that gives their culture its special character. The culture, as culture, Dewey suggests, "cannot be stated or be made explicit. It is taken for granted, 'understood' or implicit" in everything that occurs within its meaning boundaries.[13] Culture is the container in which all activity takes place. To study that container, one must step outside it. Dewey makes the point with an analogy: "A quart bowl cannot be held within itself or in any of its contents. It may, however, be contained in another bowl."[14]

The social scientist must work outside of the cultural bowl or, more accurately, he or she must put the cultural bowl inside another system of relevance.[15] The goal, as one anthropologist put it:

> . . . is not to achieve some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants; preferring like the rest of us to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to.[16]

We must resist "going native" for, to become socialized means we will take for granted what our informants take for granted, and thus the qualitative unity of their experience will be as invisible to us as it is to them. We must work outside the bowl. We must find a way to enter a culture and yet stay outside.

That is the trick of qualitative inquiry. We must begin with what Schutz called "first order constructs." We can examine the socially constructed reality with which people make sense of their world. We can attend to their meanings, acts, and experiences. In order to gain understanding, we must seek the qualitative pattern that permeates their existence. That entails forming what Schutz called "second order constructs."[17] These concepts are not part of the conscious thinking of the people being studied, but they help us understand the distinctive quality of their culture.

"Science," wrote Bronowski, "is nothing else than the search to discover unity in the wild variety of nature--or more exactly, in the variety of our experience."[18] The order that exists in social environments, like the order of nature, usually hides itself in apparent disarray. "If it can be said to be there at all," Bronowski warned, "it is not there for the mere looking. There is no way of pointing a finger or camera at it; order must be discovered and, in a deep sense, it must be created."[19] The construction of order is, in fact, an act of disciplined imagination, or, to use a Deweyian phrase, of "speculative audacity."[20] Ultimately, of course, the order that researchers construct must square with and make sense of the reality under investigation. The goal, as Bronowski made clear, is to "take parts of the universe that have not been connected hitherto and . . . show . . . them to be connected."[21] It is through connection and order that predictability and intelligibility are discovered.

Dewey saw no useful division between qualitative and quantitative research. Such division, he once wrote, make about as much sense as "dividing botanists into rootists and flowerists." He complained that statistical research was raking up data into a "miscellaneous pile of meaningless items." He warned that mere statistics are not social facts. "Their connection with any system of

human purposes and consequences . . . are left out of the picture. There is nothing which binds them together into an intelligible whole."[22] They capture quantity, but they neglect quality. Dewey's notion of the qualitative helps us to see what various qualitative methods have in common. But it does more. It shows that all social research, no matter what its method, must have a qualitative dimension. All human science research must grow from and ultimately return to human experience.

NOTES

[1]Journal of Thought 21, (1986). Preface by Robert R. Sherman and Rodman B. Webb, guest editors, plus six articles, pp. 2-105. Journal of Thought 19, (1984). Introductory article by Robert R. Sherman, Rodman B. Webb, and Samuel D. Andrews, guest editors, plus four articles, pp. 25-94.

[2]Robert R. Sherman and Rodman B. Webb, Qualitative Inquiry: Unity in Variety (New York: Falmer Press, in press).

[3]John Dewey, "Social Science and Social Control" in The New Republic (July 29, 1931). Reprinted in Intelligence in the Modern World, ed. Joseph Ratner (New York: Modern Library, 1939), p. 949.

[4]Clifford Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding" in Interpretive Social Science: A Reader, eds. Paul Rainbow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 239. Quoted in Richard Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 95.

[5]Richard Rorty has pointed out that the greatest contribution of qualitative research is its ability to render intelligible the life world of strangers. The understanding provided by such research confirms the humanity of others (by showing how we are alike), and simultaneously confirms the rich diversity of the human spirit. Richard Rorty, "Method, Social Science, and Social Hope" in Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 203.

[6]Richard Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, p. 91.

[7]Ibid., p. 88.

[8]Quoted in Richard Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, p.88.

[9]John Dewey, "Qualitative Thought" in On Experience, Nature, and Freedom, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1960), p. 176.

[10]John Dewey, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938), p. 70.

[11]John Dewey, "Qualitative Thought," p. 182.

[12]Rodman B. Webb, The Presence of the Past: John Dewey and Alfred Schutz on the Genesis and Organization of Experience (Gainesville, Fl.: University Presses of Florida, 1976), pp. 31-57.

[13]John Dewey, "Qualitative Thought," p. 181.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Alfred Schutz, "Common-sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action" in Collected Papers, Vol. I, ed. Maurice Natanson (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), pp. 3-47.

[16]Clifford Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View," p. 94.

[17]Alfred Schutz, "Common-sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action," pp. 3-47.

[18]Jacob Bronowski, Science and Human Values (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), p. 16.

[19]Ibid., p. 14.

[20]John Dewey, "The Meanings of Philosophy" in Intelligence in the Modern World, ed. Joseph Ratner (New York: Modern Library, 1939), p. 255.

[21]Jacob Bronowski, The Origins of Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 110.

[22]John Dewey, "Social Science and Social Control," p. 950.