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REVIEW ESSAY

Power, Positionality, and the Ethic of Care in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Building on the definition offered by Aspers and Corte, I argue that qualitative research is not qualitative simply because it encodes for the ability "to get closer" to the phenomenon being studied, so much as it is anchored by a methodological obligation to critically examine how and why that closeness matters. Qualitative research considers the positionality of both the researcher and the researched as core aspects of inquiry to understand how knowledge and experience are situated, co-constructed, and historically and socially located. This methodological expectation for reflexivity does not just allow for richer data, but also requires researchers to consider power within and surrounding the research process and to employ an ethic of care for their subjects and for the overall work of qualitative research.

Keywords Qualitative methods · Ethic of care · Positionality · Embodiment

Aspers and Corte (2019) set out to define what is "qualitative about qualitative research." The authors insist we move beyond methodological discussions that explain what qualitative research does or how it happens, to focus instead on what it is. They insist that qualitative researchers should be able to "codify their practices in a condensed, yet general way expressed in language" (143). The authors quite reasonably argue it is inadequate to define qualitative research simply in terms of its opposition to quantitative methods. At times, the endeavor sounds like the famous 1964 US Supreme Court decision in which one justice memorably, albeit vaguely, wrote of pornography: "I know it when I see it" (1964 *Jacobellis v. Ohio*). To their credit, Aspers and Corte aim to develop an operational definition that is overarching and useful to a range of methods and goals. They move beyond the notions that qualitative research is "qualitative" simply because it is not "quantitative" or because you know it when you see it.

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The authors identify qualitative research as research that "involves the interaction and questioning of concepts (theory), data, and evidence" (154), noting that this is "an iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied" (155). They provide a detailed explanation of their search for an operational definition for what qualitative research is, which seemingly leads them to examine a number of seminal works in the field. Unfortunately, they also overlook much of the methodological writings and contributions of women, scholars of color, and queer scholars whose work over the past several decades offers a great deal to the endeavor of defining what is qualitative about qualitative research generally and in terms of what it means for researchers to work by "getting closer to the phenomenon studied."

Taking this definition as a starting point, I argue that qualitative research is not qualitative because it encodes for the ability "to get closer" to the phenomenon being studied, so much as qualitative research is anchored by a methodological obligation to critically examine how and why that closeness matters. I suggest here that we can build on the definition offered by Aspers and Corte by adding that qualitative research is qualitative because of the explicit ways that it considers the positionality of both the researcher and the researched as core aspects of inquiry. In doing so, qualitative research moves beyond simply examining the words or actions of participants to take seriously the ways knowledge and experience are situated and co-constructed. In qualitative research, it is not simply the participants' positionality that matters, but also the researchers' examination of their own positionality as embodied actors that informs the questioning, analyses, and representational decisions, which thus powerfully improves understanding of how participants' lived experiences and meaningful perspectives are historically and socially located.

The core then of qualitative research is the use of methods of inquiry that require epistemological examination of knowledge as embodied and situated, and also that demand consideration of power within and surrounding the research process. This methodological expectation for reflexivity does not just allow for richer data, but also requires researchers to employ an ethic of care for their subjects and for the overall work of qualitative research. These considerations and the ethic of care that follows from them are not exactly additions to the definition provided by Aspers and Corte, as much as they clarify the very meaning of what counts as qualitative research.

Getting "Closer" to Participants' Situated Knowledge

Qualitative researchers focus on the ways power and interaction shape the processes of gathering data, conducting analysis, and presenting findings. Feminist standpoint theory more than three decades ago called for researchers to reject positivism in favor of methodologies that value situational knowledge that comes from participants' unique experience and social location (Hill Collins 1986; Harding 1991; Stacey and Thorne 1985). As Smith (1992, 91) writes,

> "Inquiry starts with the knower who is actually located; she is active; she is at work; she is connected with particular other people in various ways; she thinks, laughs, desires, sorrows, sings, curses, loves just here; she reads here; she watches television. Activities, feelings, experiences, hook her into extended social relations linking her activities to those of other people and in ways beyond her knowing."

Good qualitative research examines participants' lives as they experience them as meaningful and complex, which in turn allows for nuanced examinations of social structure and inequality. Pointing to the limitations of more quantitative positivist scholarship, Stacey and Thorne (1985, 308) observed how in-depth analyses and research that considers positionality can be transformative. Although quantitative data on inequality are important in documenting problems, they note that "much of this literature, however, is unreflective about the nature of gender as a social category." They caution that simply seeing gender as "a property of individuals… rather than as a principle of social organization" risks diminishing "the sense of the whole that is crucial to theoretical understanding of social, including gender, relationships."

Qualitative research, in its capacity to examine lives as embedded, complicated, contradictory, and socially meaningful, is methodologically unique, not simply because it is "closer" to participants so much as its closeness offers powerful insight intrinsic to the methodologies, analytical systems, and processes of categorization. As Dunbar, Rodriguez, and Parker (2002, 279) ask of studies of race,

> "Does the researcher/interviewer approach the respondent as if he or she were simply a vessel of answers—a mere interviewee—who can provide the information needed for a particular story or the data for a research project, or does the interviewer treat the respondent as a subject replete with a full complement of historical, biographical, and social sensibilities?"

Employing qualitative tools of analysis that consider participant knowledge as situated has facilitated methodological innovations in studying how lived experiences are structured by systems of inequality across, race, class, sexuality, gender, disability, and other axes. Such analytic tools further allow for explications of those systems and the institutions that support inequities. It is the "iterative process" and "interaction and questioning of concepts (theory), data, and evidence" that Aspers and Corte identify that mark these aspects as inextricably linked to the method in ways that deserve greater explication.

Methodological Power in Positionality

Qualitative researchers have prioritized accounting for the ways their own embodiment and social location matter in the process of designing studies, accessing sites and participants, collecting and analyzing data, and disseminating findings, which requires representational choices. This kind of methodological reflexivity that expects qualitative researchers to consider how they affect research subjects

and environments, and thus the research itself, has become central to qualitative methodologies.

Rather than treating the researchers' positionality as "limitation," or as a layer added on to the analysis, qualitative research has increasingly accounted for the ways that the closeness intrinsic to the method is refracted through existing systems of inequality in ways that yield important insight (Arendell 1997; Davis and Khonach 2020; Hancock 2018; Hoang 2015; Mose Brown and Dreby 2013; Ostrander 1993; Schwalbe and Wolkimir 2001; Reich 2003; Rios 2011; see for example Anderson 2000; Moore 2011). As Stuart (2017, 213) suggests, reflexivity is "a central tool in [ethnographers'] analytical toolkit." Rather than aiming to blend in, he argues that fieldworkers should embrace "the fact that they are engaged in an act of transgression each and every time they set foot in the field" and that this transgression is methodologically advantageous and important.

This is not to suggest that the social location, assumptions, and experiences of quantitative researchers do not also affect their data, just that the same expectations to account for these ways are not yet the norm (Ryan and Golden 2006; Westbrook et al. 2021). Considerations of positionality provide a kind of epistemic accountability (Davis and Khonach 2020; Harding 1991) that is core to qualitative research and can only be dismissed when stacked against quantitative positivistic research that lacks these same expectations.

A Methodological Ethic of Care

Qualitative researchers noting the very closeness to phenomenon—qua people and communities—call for more self-reflection to avoid reproducing inequalities in qualitative investigations and in ethnographic accounts (Naples and Sachs 2000). The very closeness intrinsic to qualitative research raises important questions that have resulted in a methodological obligation to embrace an ethic of care that is arguably now core to qualitative research. This ethic of care emanates from awareness that research can cause harm to individuals and communities, and at times, the researchers themselves (Hanson and Richards 2017). With this in mind, González-López (2011, 460) advocates for "mindful ethics" in research, which demand "an introspective dialogue that encompasses intuition and respect for informants, other people involved in my projects, and myself, and is always motivated by a genuine intention to avoid harm and pain."

Although self-reflection is not alone enough to protect research participants, Stacey (1988, 26) suggests that "rigorous self-awareness of the ethical pitfalls in the method enables one to monitor and then to mitigate some of the dangers to which ethnographers expose their informants." This ethic of care requires researchers to critically examine how the inequities in power between the observed and the observer matter in protecting or harming participants. The interactions that create the closeness between participants and researchers, decisions about representation, and consideration of the uses of research require an ethic of care that is reflexive and deliberate about the power inequalities inherent in research. An ethic of care may require a researcher to make decisions about

what personal information to share that could make the researcher vulnerable, but potentially more trustworthy (Connell 2018; Hughes 2018), leave out information that is potentially harmful to a participant (Bosk 2008; González-López 2011), or consider how technologies change access to information in and outside of the study (Reich 2015; Stuart 2020).

Because, as Aspers and Corte point out, qualitative research builds on closeness, the researcher is always part of the research in ways that may or may not be fully acknowledged. An ethic of care works against writing that objectifies the closeness as evidence of good data and potentially exploits the participants. As Small (2015, 353) cautions of the risks of ethnographic writing that objectifies the urban poor and valorizes the researcher, "Reflective or not, there is always some representation of the observer…it is here where lack of reflection has led to inadvertent stereotypes and worse." Qualitative research when done well addresses this. Writing of their recent collection of essays outlining queer research methods, Compton, Meadow, and Schilt (2018, 5) explain their goal:

> "At the heart of this project is a desire to find ways to gather empirical data about the experiences of people who are politically and socially marginalized without reproducing such marginalization through practices of research and theorizing that conflate objectification with 'good science'."

This ethic of care is not an addition or a new expectation to qualitative research so much as it identifies core tenets of the method done correctly. Throughout, qualitative research is—or should be—built on an ethic of care that is intrinsic to the method. As Dunbar et al. (2002, 281) explain, "The only *ethic* that properly applies in interviewing is one that accords the subject all the humanity he or she deserves" (emphasis in original).

What is Qualitatively Qualitative

Aspers and Corte provide an overarching definition of qualitative research, which, after their review of a particular body of research, is a useful contribution. It is equally useful to add that core to the endeavor of doing qualitative research is the skill and responsibility that facilitate and result "from getting closer to the phenomenon studied." Doing so highlights what is qualitatively different in qualitative research and helps to move the field forward in ways that meaningfully measure and analyze the lived experiences and perspectives of communities and individuals as culturally embedded, socially located, and shaped by structures of inequality. Despite overlooking decades of scholarship that aims to account for this closeness, in all its methodological challenge and richness, Aspers and Corte have provided a useful foundation on which those committed to the enterprise of continuing to define what is qualitative in qualitative research may build.

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