

## Editors' Introduction

In March 1995, some 30 people, practitioners, and scholars of participative forms of inquiry met in Bath, England, at our invitation for a 4-day conference. We were gathered to explore what we meant by high-quality research in this mode of inquiry. Although a significant strand of social research has been an action-oriented and reform-minded tradition since its inception (Greenwood, personal communication, October 1995), mainstream social science has been largely captured by a detached and quasi-positivist spirit. During the early 1970s, there was a resurgence of interest in participatory forms of inquiry in education, social action, and research, and these emergent participatory approaches to inquiry have now reached a degree of maturity. Several different methodological schools have developed, which, during the 1990s, have begun to enter into a mutual dialogue (Reason, 1994). It seemed appropriate to us, therefore, to gather representatives of these different approaches to explore the question, "What do we mean by high-quality work in this mode of research?"

Our invitation to this conference read in part as follows:

Over the past 25 years, several new approaches to human inquiry in the social and behavioral sciences have emerged that stand in contrast to the orthodox positivist paradigm. These approaches share in common the intention of moving away from the traditional separation of roles between researcher and subject and moving toward working with the other protagonists in the inquiry endeavour as co-inquirers. Such approaches are variously called co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1981; Reason, 1988), action inquiry (Torbert, 1991), participatory action research (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991), critical action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), action science (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985), naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), and feminist research (Mies, 1983, 1993); other terms are also used.

These approaches to inquiry are diverse, yet they are all "postmodern" in the sense that they reject an epistemology based on simple objectivity and embrace an experiential, constructivist, and action-oriented worldview. They move beyond traditional methods based on researcher control of methodology toward participative methods that evolve through dialogue. And rather than rely on methodology as the sole guarantor of validity, they build on the human capacity for critical reflection as the basis of their work.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify five key differences between the axioms of positivist and postpositivist inquiry (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1: Axioms of Positivist and Postpositivist Inquiry**

<i>Axioms</i>	<i>Positivist Paradigm</i>	<i>Postpositivist Paradigm</i>
The nature of reality	Reality is single, tangible, and fragmentable	Realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic
The relationship of knower to the known	Knower and known are independent, a dualism	Knower and known are interactive, inseparable
The possibility of generalization	Time- and context-free generalizations . . . are possible	Only time- and context-bound working hypotheses . . . are possible
The possibility of causal linkages	There are real causes . . .	All entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping . . .
The role of values	Inquiry is value-free	Inquiry is value-bound

SOURCE: Adapted from Lincoln and Guba (1985).

More recently, Reason (1993b) argued that the contributors to the special edition of human relations on action research (Elden & Chisholm, 1993) paid insufficient attention of the profound differences between the assumptions that lie behind orthodox social science research and the "emerging varieties" of action research explored in the special edition. He pointed to five qualities of contemporary action research—action research as enhancing the system's capacity of self-study; action research as social construction of reality; engaging with large and diffuse systems; insiders as coresearchers; and high leverage (i.e., for creating change)—that depart radically from the assumptions of orthodox social science inquiry and thus require a new creative approach to epistemology and quality. It is the participatory aspects of the new forms of research that are the particular focus of this conference.

In the light of these shifts in assumptions, the emerging forms of inquiry need to establish sound bases for judgments of quality that are congruent with their worldview and epistemology. In the absence of such bases, assessments can only be made on inadequate grounds. Standards and criteria may be imported, with amendments, from a positivist worldview, but such standards, based primarily on separation of subject and object, and on a view of knowledge as separate from action, are quite inappropriate for these forms of inquiry. Alternatively, research within the new paradigm will only be assessed against ill-defined and loose criteria or against criteria developed only in reaction and opposition to positivist criteria.

In this conference and special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry*, we wish to address the question, "What are characteristics of high-quality inquiry in these emerging methodologies?" We wish to question the purpose of inquiry within this framework; to develop and describe criteria of quality; to explore the epistemological roots that inform them; to identify the skills, attitudes, and political forms they call for in practice; and to provide some examples.

Our intention was to initiate an exploratory dialogue among the participants, to establish a genuine exchange of views, and hopefully to develop some new ideas and approaches to the question we posed. To this end, we kept the conference small, with membership by invitation only, so that the participants were leading exponents of their field of practice. We decided that about 30 people was the maximum that could engage in face-to-face conversation. The participants came from four continents representing both sides of the North/South divide; some saw themselves primarily as radical intellectuals, some as educators, some as activists. Many encompassed all these activities, whereas all were committed to a postpositivist worldview in the widest sense of that term, each one having developed her or his own particular perspective, drawing on a creative mix of constructivist, developmental, humanist, liberationist, feminist, and postmodern worldviews. Drawing on these different worldviews, the participants were committed to different approaches to human inquiry including participatory action research, constructivist inquiry, cooperative inquiry, action inquiry, and qualitative inquiry. However, we were united in our belief that inquiry must engage actively in the lives of those it intends to represent and must be of use.

To get our conversations underway and establish an agenda of issues, we asked the participants to prepare a short professional biography and a statement of the key concerns that they wished to see discussed, which we circulated beforehand. In addition, some participants wrote longer position papers, which were also circulated. We kept the process of the conference informal yet structured, starting with the agenda of issues that had been identified in the preconference statements and allowing space later for emergent agendas. To keep the conversation informal and flexible, we avoided the formal structure of paper presentations, but instead asked those conference participants who seemed to be most concerned about different issues to provide an opening statement that would stimulate a wider conversation.

After taking some time for the participants to get to know each other, we started our discussion by considering the purposes of participative inquiry. We wished to interrupt the positivist assumption that the only, or main, purpose of research was to "contribute to the field of knowledge," so we asked what the wider purposes of a human inquiry might be. We moved from there to consider the underlying epistemological assumptions on which we might base a definition of quality, wondering whether it would ever be possible to define clear criteria of quality and whether a more pragmatic approach might be more appropriate. We then identified the major schools of methodology represented in the room, attempting to familiarize ourselves with the range of practice we brought to the dialogue and then asked what the implications of these methods for quality were. This question took us into a more detailed consideration in three subgroups of the nature of knowledge and the possibility of an extended epistemology; into an exploration of the underlying values of our practice; and into a consideration of the nature of

participatory relationships. This agenda brought us to the end of the second day of deliberations.

On the third day, we looked at the individual skills and attitudes and also at the qualities of community required for high-quality participative research. These qualities will be quite different from those required for research in a positivist mode. This is clearly an important dimension of quality in human inquiry, because the quality of the research will depend largely on the quality of individual and communal attention and the relationship brought to bear. Following that, we explored issues of communication of research, the "crisis of representation" as it has been called (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). We talked about narrative and illustrative form, about multidimensional presentation, and about how the presentation of findings might be both true to the experience of the research participants and also politically effective in influencing public understanding of the issues at stake.

We had some very fruitful dialogue. We were able to have effective conversations between people whose orientation, on the face of it, was profoundly different. We often found we were talking, from our different perspectives, about the same issues. We discovered that some of the concerns of the more academic participants were reflected in those of the practitioners. We discovered that the needs of those working in southern countries were mirrored by the concerns of those working in the North.

This special issue is an attempt to communicate from the conference (other papers have at least in part been stimulated by the conference debate, notably Lincoln's [1995] review of emerging criteria for quality and Torbert's [1995] articulation of a range of scientific paradigms). In the following pages, you will find a series of articles that represent the major issues we discussed together. The articles are not attempts to cover the whole field of our debate, but have been selected because they point effectively to our concerns and articulate one of the many viewpoints present at the conference. Each article is preceded by an editorial page, which briefly comments on the article in the context of the conference debate.

The reader must be warned that we do not resolve the question of quality in human inquiry in these pages. We certainly do not attempt the impossible task of offering final answers. Indeed, we do not think we could do so, given the current state of the art and also Schwandt's argument in this issue that it is not possible to establish firm and clear criteria. Rather, our intention is to address some of the issues raised as a means of stimulating the debate. Thus this issue is an experiment and an invitation. It is an experiment in that not all the articles are framed within an orthodox Western academic tradition—we have tried to represent the different voices present at our dialogue, from Tom Schwandt's academic scholarship to Marja-Liisa Swantz's story of her personal quest for living knowledge. The issue is also an experiment in engagement with readers as we invite you to consider *and re-vision* your understanding of the purposes of inquiry not just as the privileged pursuit

of intellectuals but more as a way of life and a form of service. And so this issue is also an experiment in thinking about new and emergent processes for quality in participative inquiry, qualities that not only concern rigor and method but also require systematic attention to ways of doing, being, and living.

So we would ask the reader to ponder on the relationship between theory and practice and on the role of theory in effective practice. This theme recurred many times in our conversations. There were different attitudes to this between those more concerned with practice and those whose role was more scholarly and academic, so that after a while we framed the question, "What is the role of the intellectual in a postmodern world?" which clearly merits extended consideration. For many of those present, the *practice* of participatory research and its emancipatory potential was of prime importance, far more significant than intellectual debate, which while seen as potentially supportive, is secondary—and may indeed be a distraction. This is reflected in the concerns to "face the people" and "to be of use" reported in Peter Reason's article, and in John Heron's felicitous phrase "the primacy of the practical." The role of ideas may be to prepare a way for effective action. From this it follows that quality in human inquiry is to be found in its practice, in the qualities brought to the *doing* of it, and in its outcomes.

If quality in human inquiry is not just about impersonal method but is to be found in its practice, then the skills of those engaged together in the inquiry process are of central significance. We are using the term "skills" in the broadest sense to include both individual competencies and attitudes and the evolving culture of competence of a community of inquiry; thus we include both the skills of the initiating researcher be they educator, consultant, facilitator, or animateur, *and* the evolving skills of the participants in the inquiry. We have not found space to include an article addressing questions of skill, but here briefly note that critical skills include at least the following:

Interpersonal competence—the willingness and ability to enter into democratic relationships with others, to initiate the formation of an inquiry process and to nurture its development, to know when to lead and when to follow the initiatives of others, and to remain creative and open in the face of conflict.

Political competence—knowing how to survive (and thrive) within the power structures of social life, when to confront entrenched power structures and when to circumvent them, and how to use power in creative ways for worthy purposes.

Emotional competence—which is in part the ability to notice when one's experience in the present is affected by the emotional residue of past events or current preoccupations and by the bias of gender, race, and class; and to take the appropriate internal action to bracket this disturbance so that actual behavior is minimally distorted.

Moral and ethical competence—the ability to judge what purposes are worthy of pursuit, which contribute to the flourishing of life.

Intellectual openness and creativity—includes the ability to be aware of the frame through which one is perceiving current events and to be aware that others may

hold different frames (Torbert, 1991); and the ability to fashion new frames and new perspectives that offer a creative new understanding of situations, to see what Bateson (1979) calls the "pattern which connects."

Spiritual qualities—which includes an openness to the ultimate mysterious and numinous qualities of being, and profound concern for justice and the dignity and integrity of other persons and all living beings (Lincoln, 1995; Reason, 1993a).

The exercise of skills such as these is multidimensional and paradoxical (Reason, 1995). Further, the relation between individual skills and the competencies of a community is complex (Heron, 1989). In the early days of an inquiry, the initiating inquirer may need to work at the outer limit of her or his skills to provide the kind of leadership that will make the inquiry possible; but equally, the inquiry will only mature if the coresearchers embrace similar skills themselves and if the community as a whole is able to develop norms, values, and patterns of behavior that support and amplify individual skills (see, e.g., Reason, 1995; Torbert, 1991).

However such skills are described (as we have noted elsewhere), whereas in orthodox social science method is primary and the subjects of the inquiry are subordinate to it, in human inquiry "the primary source of knowing and thus the primary 'instrument' of research is the self-directing person within a community of inquiry" (Reason & Heron, 1995, p. 123).

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