When an irresistible epistemology meets an immovable ontology

Jerome C. Wakefield

The human sciences' ontology of meanings and quantitative epistemology are at odds. Quantitative methods, although superior for demonstrating validity and generalizability, are not well suited for the reconstruction of meanings, which have been considered the essence of the mind since the cognitive revolution. However, qualitative methods, although effective for studying meanings, do not currently possess adequate validity and generalizability to yield professionally reliable knowledge. There is nothing in the recent surge of literature on qualitative methods, including two new books, that shows how to resolve this dilemma. Radical behaviorists failed in their attempt to solve the problem by reconstructing social science without its meanings. The postmodernist solution that truth and validity do not exist and can be ignored is self-defeating and undermines social work's aspirations and claims of competence. The roots of the qualitative-quantitative quandary can be traced to two opposed Greek philosophical visions of human science that emphasize number (Pythagoras) and meaning (Socrates) as the essence of mind, and we may yet have something to learn about improving qualitative validity from the idiographic question-and-answer method of studying meaning systems pioneered by Socrates.

Key words: epistemology; history; qualitative methods; quantitative methods; ontology

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Because I want to focus on broad background issues concerning qualitative research, I will not say much directly about Riessman's (1994) or Sherman and Reid's (1994) anthologies. So it is worth stating at the outset that these are both excellent books containing fascinating examples of the exploration of personal meanings using qualitative research methods. Both books make enjoyable and provocative reading and can be used in a variety of social work courses, especially research courses for direct practice students. Many of the strengths of qualitative research are well illustrated in these books, such as illuminating descriptions, intimate dramatizations of injustice that provoke empathy and mobilize altruistic support (an essential function of qualitative social work research according to the "justice model" of social work put forward by Wakefield, 1988a, 1988b, 1993), and identification of possible background meanings that the clinician might otherwise miss. Also well illustrated are many weaknesses of qualitative methods, such as formulation of superficial typologies that are so "grounded" in the data that they do not explain anything, ideological biases of the researcher who both interviewed the subjects and interpreted their responses that leave one wondering whether the results have any validity, and forced attempts to link data to a preferred theory without considering alternative explanations. But by and large, these collections offer unusually thoughtful examples of the use of qualitative methods.

Riessman's and Sherman and Reid's books are part of a recent avalanche of books on qualitative methods that challenge the hegemony of quantitative methods and in effect argue for a renewed commitment to qualitative studies in social work research. All this activity suggests the question, "Why now?" As Sherman and Reid note, qualitative methods dominated social work research earlier in this century. There were reasons researchers became resistant to such methods, including concerns about validity (that is, the correctness of the researcher's interpretations) and generalizability (that is, the applicability of findings to people other than those studied). The books inadequately acknowledge...
the seriousness of these reasons and present insufficient
discussion of what, if anything, has changed. Assertions
to the effect that “there are many ways of knowing,”
“all research methods have biases,” or “qualitative and
quantitative methods are complementary and must be
integrated” evade these substantive methodological
issues. The failure to satisfactorily address the tradi­
tional objections suggests that the resurgence in quali­
tative studies is due more to broad historical move­
ments than to specific intellectual insights.

**TENSION BETWEEN QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE METHODS**

The human sciences are ultimately concerned with
meanings—the pleasures and pains, thoughts and val­
ues, perceptions and emotions, intentions and actions,
beliefs and desires, fears and hopes—that constitute
human experience. Especially in an applied discipline
like social work, other concerns are important only if
they have eventual implications for such experienced
meanings. Meanings are thus the immovable bedrock
ontology on which theory must be founded. We know
this not only from theory and research but also from
introspective awareness of our own conscious experi­
ences and how they often explain our actions.

However, meaning systems are extraordinarily com­
plex and idiosyncratically structured and, thus, hard
to study (for discussion of some of the complexities of
meaning systems, see Wakefield, 1989, 1990). Mean­
ing systems are holistic in that there are links between
meanings, so that, for example, any belief or desire
can potentially influence any other. And they are
equifinal, because the same action can result from many
different causes, and the same belief can be based on
many different premises. Consequently, understand­
ing meaning systems requires painstaking idiographic
analysis (analysis of the unique details of a single case)
using qualitative methods.

Yet such methods have not been emphasized in so­
cial work research. Instead, the emphasis in recent de­
cades has been on what are broadly categorized as
quantitative methods as the research ideal, including
experimental and quasiexperimental designs, random
samples, control groups, validated collection instru­
mants, and statistical analysis of data. Quantitative
methods are considered preferable because they are
superior for establishing validity and generalizability.
Validity and generalizability are important because they
are tied to the distinctive purpose of social work re­
search, which is the generation of knowledge that can
be used to improve professional intervention.

Generalizability is a problem for qualitative research
because such research does not use random sampling
or related statistical techniques to ensure that the people
who are studied are representative of some broader
population that is of professional interest. Thus, there
is the danger that interventions that appear appropri­
ate for the participants in a study may prove irrelevant
or even harmful to other people. The most extreme
case of improper generalization occurs when a theore­
tician simply introspects about his or her own experi­
ences and directly generalizes the results into a univer­
sal theory that is imposed on all clients, without testing
the theory on representative samples. Many of today’s
clashing theories were born this way, and it is not sur­
prising that none of them have lived up to their initial
claims. Of course, theoreticians from Freud to Skinner
have claimed that, like physicists studying elementary
particles, they could discern universal mental principles
through the careful study of a few cases. Such claims
have generally turned out to be false, often with disas­
trous results for practice. Human meaning systems are
simply not as homogeneous in their behavior as el­
ementary particles like electrons. Except under very
exceptional circumstances, generalizability cannot be
assumed and must be demonstrated. Quantitative
methods are designed to produce data that are repre­
sentative of populations of interest.

With regard to validity, we obviously want the prin­
ciples on which we base our attempts to change people’s
lives to be as correct as possible. Thus, we want our
research to get at the truth about which interventions
help people and which underlying meanings cause spe­
cific actions, feelings, or thoughts. Validity is a problem
in qualitative studies because of the potential effect of
the researcher’s biases and the subjects’ suggestibility
on qualitative interview data and their interpretation
and because of the difficulty of making causal judg­
ments based on studies where no variables are con­
trolled. Quantitative methods are designed to mini­
mize the effect of such obstacles on validity.

Every day we constantly interpret the beliefs and
desires of people around us, often correctly, although
even between people who know each other intimately,
interpretive understanding can be remarkably fallible.
Our natural affinity for interpreting meanings may be
part of what gives qualitative researchers a sense of
certainty about their interpretations. However, expe­
rience suggests that as soon as interpretation veers from
common sense to more theoretically complex applica­
tions, the fallibility of interpretation and especially the
influence of interpreter bias become overwhelming and
the sense of certainty becomes inflated. Indeed, one
reason that case studies and other qualitative methods
lost much of their appeal to researchers was the blos­
soming of a multiplicity of psychotherapeutic theories
that each supported its claim to exclusive truth with seemingly incontrovertible case studies of therapeutic success, much as the physicians who bled their patients, the phrenologists, the mesmerists, and even the exorcists of demonic possession had done earlier. Any method looks good when there is community agreement about its results; for example, the case studies of Freud seemed convincing as long as Freudian theory was the one psychoanalytic approach. Validity problems generally emerge when there are objections and alternative explanations, which there usually are, because the fertility of the human imagination in coming up with possible explanations far outpaces reality. With the explosion of theories of therapy, conflicts in the therapeutic community revealed the arbitrariness of case interpretations and the inability of case studies to provide a convincing guide to the truth for anyone who was not already convinced.

One characteristic of science is to increase validity by raising, substantially above the requirements of common sense, the threshold for how rigorous the evidence has to be before anyone accepts a conclusion. Qualitative methods often do not differ much from the inference methods used in our daily judgments and to that extent do not seem scientific. For the practice researcher looking for something that can be called scientific knowledge, that has more validity than the confrontation, with the tradition that preceded him.

Qualitative methods often do not differ much from the inference methods used in our daily judgments and to that extent do not seem scientific. For the practice researcher looking for something that can be called scientific knowledge, that has more validity than the clashing opinions of rival therapists, the epistemological advantages (with respect to our ability to establish reliable knowledge) of quantitative methods often prove irresistible.

Of course, the difference between quantitative and qualitative methods is a matter of degree. No method is even close to perfect, all studies stand open to confusion, and the results of quantitative studies themselves require interpretation. But by their very structure, quantitative studies often answer certain potential objections that qualitative studies do not, and the construction of an argument that answers as many potential objections as possible is the paramount goal of research methodology. Thus, quantitative methods respond to our deep longing for certain knowledge.

However, quantitative techniques do not easily get at the idiographic structure of meaning systems. Thus, they fail to address our equally deep longing to understand. There is tension between the ultimate nature of the domain of interest and the available means for coming to valid conclusions about that domain. We seem forced to trade richness of knowledge for certainty of knowledge. The tension between wanting to know the truth (with confidence) and wanting to know the truth (in as full-blooded a version as possible) goes back a very, very long way.

The sciences have now split off from philosophy, but the early philosophers were what we now call natural and social scientists—philosophy, after all, just means “love of wisdom.” Of these earliest philosophers, Socrates was the first qualitative researcher into human meanings, using a systematic question-and-answer interviewing technique to explore the moral belief systems of those in Athens who claimed to have wisdom. The distant roots of the current tension between qualitative and quantitative approaches, and the divergent visions motivating these approaches, are reflected in Socrates’ confrontation with the tradition that preceded him.

That tradition began with Thales, generally acknowledged as the first Western philosopher. His central thesis was that “all is water.” This idea is not quite as absurd as it sounds. Of all the substances known to us, water is the only one that can apparently take all three forms—gas, liquid, and solid—under natural conditions, making it at least possible in principle that all the variety of things found on earth could be variations of forms of water. Moreover, animals will die without water, and when and only when water goes into the ground do plants rise out of the ground, suggesting that life is made of water (chemically, this premise is not far wrong). So, given what Thales knew, anyone who wanted to construct a theory of the one true essence of everything would find the theory that water is the essence as good a theory as one is likely to find. Thales’ theory was essentialistic in that it identified an underlying theoretical property as the ultimate reality, and it was a nomological (that is, universal law) approach in that it claimed that everything within a certain domain (in this case, everything is the domain) was of a certain sort. Obviously, this robust Greek essentialism is the antithesis of positivism, which denies the existence of hidden theoretical entities underlying observable appearances.

Pythagoras: Number as Essence

Pythagoras advanced the essentialist program in a surprising direction, replacing concrete substances with abstract numbers as the ultimate essence. If one essence explained the nature of everything, then that essence must combine in various ways to create many appearances. To understand the world, one needed a theory of what the elementary structure of the essence was and how that elementary structure combined to form all the apparent things in the world. Pythagoras, a mathematician, realized that the structure of the essence and the laws of combination could be described entirely in mathematical terms. What was most important was not...
the specific identity of the essence (if everything is made of the same essence, then the label is somewhat arbitrary), but the laws regulating the combining properties of the essence that made it possible for everything to be made of that essence. The mathematical formulas for these properties were the real explanation for the nature of everything. So, going Thales one better, Pythagoras declared with remarkable ontological boldness that “all is number.” Quantity and its proportions exhausted the domain of science.

So far, the human sciences had not come into the picture; the early philosophers were natural philosophers only. But in declaring that all was number, Pythagoras was well aware of the potential objection that human experience, with all its complex pleasures and pains, surely could not be subsumed under his abstract essentialistic formula, and he had an answer. Indeed, it was precisely a major discovery about the relationship of consciousness to number that probably led Pythagoras to propose that all was number.

What Pythagoras had discovered was that the musical harmonies produced when the strings of the lyre vibrated together depended for their qualities on the proportional relationships of the lengths of the strings. For example, a whole note harmony across one octave occurs if the ratio of the strings is 1:2, and so on. Pythagoras presumed that the proportions of the strings caused the human response through resonance with particles that composed the soul, all of which could be described mathematically. If even the esthetic quality of the conscious experience of music was determined by proportions and thus “made of numbers,” then “all is number” did not seem far-fetched after all. Natural philosophy swallowed up psychology.

The heavenly crystal spheres which, according to Greek mythology, held the planets in their orbits were thought to vibrate slightly in their motion, and their proportional distances from the earth supposedly gave rise to a distinctive harmonious tone which, because it was in humanity’s ears from birth, was almost impossible to hear. Pythagoras reputedly heard this “music of the spheres” once while meditating on a mountaintop; the story is a cautionary tale about the ability of any theorist to hear what is consistent with his or her theory. The depth and thoroughness of Socrates’s explorations and their illuminating results suggest that qualitative researchers still have something to learn from Socrates’s methodology.

There was an important essentialistic element in Socrates’s approach to the mind’s meanings. Just as Thales had looked at the multiplicity of appearances in the natural world and asserted that all was water and Pythagoras had contemplated the world’s variety and claimed that all was number, so Socrates looked at the apparent multiplicity of the human world and saw an underlying unity. Instead of conceptualizing each mental trait as a specific set of behaviors manifested under specific circumstances (for example, courage as the disposition to move forward in battle, piety as the disposition to sacrifice to the gods), Socrates saw that behavior is caused by underlying mental entities such as beliefs and desires that manifested themselves in many different ways depending on how they combined and interacted. The very same underlying meanings that caused someone to move bravely forward in battle might lead the person to move backward if a strategic but dangerous retreat was the appropriate thing to do and might lead the individual to show similar courage in entirely different arenas such as politics or personal relationships. Courage, then, was not equal to particular behaviors but to the underlying mental states of which the behaviors were only super-
ficial manifestations. Socrates claimed not only that a virtue like courage consisted of one underlying set of beliefs and desires but that all of the important virtues were really the same thing and consisted of one essential set of meanings having to do with what is good. This counterintuitive doctrine became known to scholars as the “unity of the virtues” (for a discussion of this doctrine, see Vlastos, 1981; Wakefield, 1987, 1991); the unity doctrine is Greek essentialism applied to human behavior. Socrates himself analogized his view to a natural philosopher’s discovery that objects that appeared to be different were in fact made of the same precious substance, gold.

According to Socrates, what people want is determined by their underlying purpose and not by the means they choose to achieve that purpose. To understand an individual, one must get beyond the behavior, as the following passage from Plato’s Gorgias (Helmold, 1952) makes clear:

SOCRATES: Is it your opinion then that men desire the action they perform or do they desire the object of this action? For example, do you think that men who take medicine on a doctor’s prescription desire the action, the drinking of the medicine and the consequent discomfort, or do they desire health, and is it for this reason that they take the medicine?

POLUS: Obviously health.

SOCRATES: So, also, in the case of merchants and traders who go to sea. What they desire is not what they do, for who would choose the dangers and discomforts of a long sea voyage? But what they want, I suppose, is the object of their voyage, to get rich, and it is for the sake of wealth that they go to sea.

POLUS: Quite so.

SOCRATES: And isn’t the same true in all other cases? When a man engages in an action for the sake of something else, it is not the action he desires but the end and object of the action?

POLUS: Yes. (p. 29)

If an individual’s purposes are not contained in the individual’s behavior but in the individual’s mind, and if superficially similar behavior can be generated from many different underlying purposes, then the study of behavior alone cannot hope to yield an understanding of an individual’s nature. In rejecting the earlier Greek view that personality traits like courage are certain kinds of behavior, and in emphasizing that to understand behavior one must pan for the hidden gold that lies in the meanings that cause behavior, Socrates anticipated the contemporary move from behaviorism to cognitive science.

Although Socrates’s method of inquiry into meaning was entirely idiographic, his investigation was guided by a principle that could be considered nomological. He believed that all human beings were ultimately motivated by the desire to do what was good and that people never did what they believed to be evil. Actions that appeared self-defeating or evil were always a matter of incorrect beliefs about the good. Thus, when understood from the inside, the end of a person’s actions (the ultimate end that would be identified if one followed the means–end chain of reasons to its final link) is the person’s desire to realize his or her idea of the good. This approach, which I call “Socratic interpretation,” imposed a heavy burden on the interpreter, who could not be content with superficial interrogation but who had to painstakingly reconstitute the hierarchy of desires and beliefs that guided the person’s search for the good and that made the individual’s actions the right ones from that person’s perspective. Philosophers have been so baffled by Socrates’s claim that everyone always wants to do what is good that this doctrine has become known as the “Socratic paradox.” Paradoxical or not, Socrates’s view remains an elegant account of the essence of the mind and a guide to empathic understanding. Socrates replaced the earlier “all is water” and “all is number” visions of the mind with “all is desire for the good.”

Pythagoras had tried to reduce the nuances of conscious experienced meaning to the numbers favored by the natural philosopher. His theory was elegant, precise, and universal in application and gave rise to clearly verifiable truths. It was based on mathematics, the most exalted and objective of disciplines, whose truths can be known with certainty. Socrates inaugurated the study of meaning as a separate discipline with its own methods of inquiry. His approach was person–by-person, messy, and inconclusive and could not have been easily reproduced by anyone but himself, but he dealt unflinchingly with the real meanings that are at the heart of our humanity. Rejecting the exalted vision of his predecessors, Socrates insisted that when it comes to what concerns us most—the sources of the moral and immoral actions of individuals—the incisiveness of mathematical proportions must give way to the unruliness of meanings. In the divergence of these two visions of the human sciences lies the origin of the quantitative–qualitative tension.

FROM MEANING TO BEHAVIOR AND BACK AGAIN

In our century, the unresolved tension between the qualitative and quantitative visions has been expressed
in dramatic fluctuations in scientific attitudes. After a period of almost exclusive reliance on case studies and qualitative methods early in the century, social work research was prodded into an epistemological transformation about 40 years ago. Eysenck (1952) challenged the psychotherapy field to demonstrate the effectiveness of clinical intervention. He argued that the appearance of clinical effectiveness, such as that reported in case studies, might often result from spontaneous remissions or placebo cures misattributed to therapy. Eysenck’s argument cut to the heart of professional claims of competence. The need to demonstrate psychotherapy’s effectiveness and the inability to do so convincingly without experimental manipulations, control groups, random samples, validated instruments, and statistical analysis of data led to a dramatic change in the nature of social work research, with quantitative methods coming to dominate practice research. That dominance was not due to a commitment to the philosophy of positivism or to an attempt by a female-dominated profession to appear professional by using numbers or to other such influences cited in Riessman’s (1994) and Sherman and Reid’s (1994) books. The primary reason for the adoption of quantitative methods was simply that the questions that most challenged and preoccupied the field required quantitative methods for their answers, and researchers responded accordingly. Moreover, those questions continue to be the most important to our profession.

Irrelevance of Positivism

The point that positivism is largely irrelevant to the quantitative–qualitative debate deserves emphasis. Contrary to widespread confusion in the social work literature that attributes to positivism all the evils of a restrictive quantitative approach to science, positivism has little intrinsically to do with the arguments for experimentation, random samples, control groups, or quantitative data analysis. Many philosophers and scientists who reject logical positivism insist on the use of quantitative methods because these methods are better at identifying causes.

In fact, the rejection of positivism makes the use of such methods even more critical. Logical positivism holds that unobserved theoretical entities do not really exist and that statements about such entities are just a shorthand way to refer to observations (for example, talk about electrons is not about ontologically real unseen particles but about observed tracks in cloud chambers). Logical positivism thus solves the epistemological problem of how we can ever be sure about our theories by translating theories into something about which, it is claimed, we can be reasonably sure, namely observations. According to this view, competing theories about underlying causes turn out to be meaningless because their claims go beyond what can be directly observed. Because positivists limit their inquiries to lawful connections between observable events and eschew the ontological notion of underlying causes altogether, philosophers of science sometimes characterize positivism as “anti-cause” (Hacking, 1983).

If one rejects positivism, one returns to the common sense doctrine that theoretical entities are real and that the relationship between theoretical entities and observation is one of causality, where the theoretical entities causally influence the observable events (for example, the cloud chamber tracks are caused by electrons moving through the vapor). Of course, all causal hypotheses are fallible, so the nonpositivist gains a more robust ontology at the cost of a more complex epistemology. The same points apply to the relationship between meaning and behavior. The positivist thinks that meanings do not exist and cause behavior and are just a shorthand for behavior, whereas the nonpositivist thinks that meanings exist as real entities in the mind that cause behavior and that meanings must be fallibly inferred from behavior. Thus, causal inquiry becomes even more critical in nonpositivist epistemology.

Quantitative methods are largely responses to the epistemological quandaries that confront any thoughtful researcher about how to validly establish causal hypotheses. Consequently, the attractions of quantitative methods are as great or greater for the nonpositivist as for the positivist. The endless attacks on positivism in the social work literature distract attention from a serious grappling with the substantive methodological issues that confront qualitative methods.

Failure of Radical Behaviorism

During roughly the same period that human services research went through an epistemological transformation to quantitative methods, the human sciences, led by psychology, went through an even more dramatic series of ontological transformations. At the dawn of the discipline of psychology late in the 19th century, leading thinkers in both the United States (for example, James and Titchener) and Europe (for example, Brentano and Wundt) assumed that psychology was the science of consciousness and that human experience was the domain that psychologists explored. Freud generalized this domain to include mental representations or meanings that are not in awareness, but meaning still remained at the heart of psychology and of the social sciences generally.
But in the middle of the 20th century, radical behaviorism challenged the focus on meaning, claiming (in terms that resonated with the arguments of logical positivists) that the science of psychology was really the science of observable human behavior. Radical behaviorists eschewed the theoretical use of internal mental states, including conscious and unconscious meanings, as explanations of behavior. They claimed that psychology was not about internal mental “essences” that caused behavior but about the behavioral “appearances” themselves. (However, although behaviorism was positivist because it eschewed explanations in terms of theoretical entities, its research was not necessarily quantitative; Skinner’s original studies of the learning trajectories of individual animals under various reinforcing conditions were as qualitative and idiographic as Freud’s case studies.)

Thus, radical behaviorism denied the importance of meaning as a level of ontology critical to understanding human behavior. To the radical behaviorist, either meaning did not exist as a real entity or meaning was an epiphenomenon with no causal significance or, as suggested by the doctrine of “logical behaviorism,” talk about meaning was simply a shorthand for talk about certain behaviors (for example, pain is not a conscious feeling that causes certain behavior but a set of dispositions to behave in certain ways, such as scream, jump around, and so on). The inadequacy of all these maneuvers is apparent. People can behave as though they are not in pain when they are not experiencing pain, and people can behave as though they are not in pain when they are experiencing pain. The experiential reality of pain transcends the behavioral indicators.

Cognitive Science and the Return to Meaning

In a more recent transformation, the “cognitive revolution” has swept the field, and the attempt by radical behaviorism to remove meaning from psychology has failed. Cognitivism is based on the premise that the essence of the mental is representationality and meaning and on the assumption that there are rules by which meanings are processed and transformed that are analogous to the programs of a computer and that can be studied scientifically. The victory of cognitive science over behaviorism, although based on many scientific developments as well as on the theoretical power and appeal of the computer metaphor for the mind, resulted most from behaviorism’s obvious incapacity to account for even the simplest facts of our internal life. Chomsky’s (1959) devastating critique of Skinner’s attempt to explain in terms of reinforcement how a child manages to learn a language was prototypical of behaviorism’s incapacities, and logical behaviorism’s failure to give an adequate account of even so basic a phenomenon as pain was fatal. Nor could behaviorism really account for its own experimental and clinical data, which suggested that learning was influenced by many specific internal mechanisms and processes beyond the behavioral principles of reinforcement (for example, that some reactions were evolutionarily “prepared” and more easily learned than others). These developments forced theoreticians to postulate the very inner processes that behaviorism had been designed to avoid.

In dealing with the realities of clinical work, behaviorists were pushed step by step toward “cognitive behaviorism,” an approach that attempted the impossible task of allowing meaning into the ontology of the theory while restricting the laws of mental functioning to the same behaviorist principles that were designed for a theory without meanings. An eventual rejection of behaviorist constraints and a return to the full exploration of the meanings that constitute cognition was inevitable.

Radical behaviorism made many important contributions to understanding certain basic processes involved in learning, and it usefully emphasized the need for observational constraints on psychological theorizing. It also appropriately refocused clinicians on symptom removal and treatment evaluation after the excesses of the psychoanalytic era. But in failing to come to grips with our experience of meaning, and in failing to account for the obvious causal efficacy of conscious and unconscious experiences in learning and in generating behavior, radical behaviorism dogmatically ignored the single most obvious empirical truth in the human sciences and thus failed to be a psychology worth having. The lesson of the cognitive revolution is that in the human sciences, the ontology of meanings is immovable.

And so we have at least a historical answer to the question, “Why now?” The victory of cognitivism liberated the search for an understanding of meaning in all its messy complexity that had remained relatively dormant during the behaviorist era. And qualitative methods are uniquely suited to the thorough exploration of meaning. Thus, the recent triumph of cognitivism has provided an opportunity for the resurgence of interest in qualitative methods.

THE EMPTINESS OF POSTMODERNISM

Validity and generalizability of causal claims are critical to the purpose of social work research, yet these are the areas in which traditional qualitative research has had the most trouble. So, the question remains whether there is an intellectual justification for renewed
confident of the opposite. There does not appear to be any methodological breakthrough or new conceptual insight that justifies such confidence. Certainly nothing in Riessman's (1994) or Sherman and Reid's (1994) books reveals such an advance. By and large, the methods reported—grounded theory, ethnographic methods, and discourse analysis—have been around for decades in essentially unchanged form.

The one distinctive recent addition to the qualitative camp is the postmodernist constructivist approach to research. But by and large, what is interesting in these approaches is not new, and what is new—specifically the eschewal of truth—is confused and self-defeating. The constructivists hope to evade the problems with validity and generalizability by arguing that these concepts are empty because there is no truth. For example, in a chapter on constructivist evaluation by Rodwell and Woody (1994), the first three "constructive assumptions for the evaluation process" are as follows: (1) "Truth' is a matter of consensus among informed and sophisticated constructors, not of correspondence with an objective reality." (2) "Facts' have no meaning except within some value framework; hence, there cannot be an 'objective' assessment of the facts." (3) "Causes' and 'effects' do not exist except by imputation, and hence, accountability is a relative matter and implicates all interacting parties" (p. 317).

These constructivist assumptions are antithetical to meaningful intellectual inquiry and have absurd consequences. If truth is consensus and if there are no objectively true facts about cause and effect, then, for example, the question of whether the Nazis caused the deaths of millions of Jews has no objective answer, and the community of "informed and sophisticated constructors" who turn out anti-Holocaust propaganda for the American Nazi Party are as correct as their detractors. If there is no objectivity, then the choice of antibiotics rather than bleeding as the treatment for bacterial infections cannot be defended on objective grounds. Closer to home, the belief that social work intervention sometimes helps people would have to be considered an arbitrary community consensus having no objective validity, because the concept of help presupposes that an intervention really causes a benefit to the client. Consequently, the constructivist view makes all claims of professional competence meaningless. Even simple causal questions, such as whether lack of food causes people to die or whether a given child's bruises were caused by walking into a door or by parental abuse, would have no objective answer. Yet we know that such questions have answers. The answers may be hard to establish, and we may often be mistaken in our conclusions, but the recognition that we can be wrong is itself dependent on our belief that there is a truth.

In the rush to embrace the latest intellectual fad in the humanities and social sciences, social work postmodernist theoreticians have not adequately considered that the postmodernist's constructivist, relativist stance undermines the claims on which social work's existence and aspirations as a profession depend. From a postmodernist perspective, there is no shared human faculty of rationality and no shared moral sense that provides a basis for objectively judging whether one social construction is better than another. Thus, the theory underlying democracy, that human beings have a need and capacity for self-realization, is just one more socially constructed "discourse" that is not objectively more accurate than opposing claims that some human groups are designed by nature or God to be exploited, dominated, even enslaved. No political system can be claimed to serve basic human needs better than any other because, in the postmodernist view, there are no basic needs except as each system constructs them. Unfortunately, my worries are not purely theoretical; some countries have used cultural relativism about needs at recent international human rights conferences to defend practices such as capital punishment for minor offenses, subjugation of women, and female genital mutilation, all on the grounds that each culture constructs what is "needed" by its members.

What is striking is the similarity of postmodernist error to positivist error. Moved by epistemological worries about how hard it is to establish truth when there are conflicting claims, both deny the existence of a reality beyond a realm of appearances. In doing so, both inflate the difficulty of establishing the truth into an ontological claim that there is no truth. But difficulty knowing is not the same as there being nothing to know. Both views commit the fundamental philosophical error of confusing epistemology with ontology.

Postmodernists are also motivated by political goals; they want to counteract the arrogance of those in power who base their actions on claimed truths. Rather than showing point by point where those in power are wrong, postmodernists deny that there is any truth at all. They think this strategy levels the epistemological playing field and creates a situation in which equality can flourish. They could not be more wrong. By denying that there are better and worse arguments for getting at the truth, postmodernists reduce all disputes to a sheer matter of power in which the claims underlying the striving for political equality have no special
status. They thus dismiss one of the few traditional restraints on power, namely, arguments about factual and moral truths. In a relativist world, a consensus by the ruling community is enough to justify their version of the truth. A more sensible approach to correcting arrogance would be what might be called “humble realism,” the view that there is indeed a reality, that there are objective truths about that reality, and that there are better and worse arguments in support of claims about that reality, combined with the views that the truth is exceptionally complex, multifaceted, and difficult to know and that many beliefs of those in power are based on weak arguments.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

Although the intellectual foundations of the qualitative resurgence are obscure, two things, at least, are clear. First, the long-term success of social work and the other human sciences depends on advancing the study of meaning systems that are immovably at the core of their concerns; doing so will inevitably require a large component of qualitative research. And second, the difficulties intrinsic to such explorations of meaning remain to be satisfactorily resolved, so that quantitative methods, despite their own limitations and their inability to capture the full reality of human experience, will remain irresistible to many, and qualitative methods will be rejected as inferior for most scientific purposes.

Of course, we must move beyond the tension between the qualitative and qualitative visions. I have nevertheless focused on the nature of that tension in the hope that squarely facing the sources of the tension may ultimately lead to a deeper and more lasting resolution. Riessman’s (1994) and Sherman and Reid’s (1994) books, by presenting us with vivid examples of the kinds of understanding that can be ours, do us the service of further motivating us to grapple with the unresolved dilemma that besets us, namely, that qualitative research is both necessary for a scientific understanding of people’s experiences and, for now, inadequately valid to convincingly provide that understanding.

I return to Socrates to make two points. First, Socrates would surely question the researchers supporting the resurgence in qualitative research. Sadly, I believe that Socrates would conclude that they lack convincing reasons and that the resurgence is self-deceptive because it is an expression of what many researchers desire but is not based on a genuine advance in knowledge. Second, when Socrates’ examination was over and our embarrassment had receded, we might observe that Socrates himself appeared to achieve profound knowledge of the causes of his interlocutor’s behavior. True, his method of questioning was more exhaustive and systematic than any used by qualitative researchers today. With the exception of his one principle that each person must be understood as doing what he or she thinks is the right thing, Socrates eschewed theory and opened himself to a fully idiographic analysis. Most of all, he approached the interlocutor with humility, professing his own ignorance. If Socrates showed through interrogation that we do not know what we think we know, he also showed by example that, despite his claim of ignorance, he knew what we want to know. Thus, one might be hopeful that through persistent methodological inquiry, we may yet be able to formulate a qualitative methodology that will dispel our doubts about the validity of qualitative research.

**REFERENCES**


Accepted November 17, 1994