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Interchanges

On Objectivity in Qualitative Research

Distinguishing Critical and Post-positivist Research

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In her recent defense of empiricism (*CCC* 47, December 1996, pp. 567–93), Davida Charney argues that "At their best, both [qualitative and quantitative] approaches seek to foster socially and intellectually significant research" (587), and she suggests that "we should take seriously our responsibility to improve our methods" (591). I strongly support the use of multiple paradigms of research in composition, and I, too, have argued that writing researchers should be more rigorous and critical in their methods (Cooper and Holzman, *CCC* 34, 1983, pp. 288–93). Unfortunately, as Charney argues with "critics in composition [who] have demonized scientific practices and practitioners" (590), she, in turn, demonizes critical research in writing, and instead of delivering on her promise of openness to multiple paradigms in writing research, asserts that "systematic objective methods" (588) are the only methods that can produce valid and sharable understandings.

My object here is not to defend critical research, but rather to argue that debates over objectivity and ethics in research are often, as in Charney's article, muddled by ignorance of, or a refusal to acknowledge, the fact that all research paradigms do not share the same notion of what knowledge is, how it is produced, and how it accumulates. The particular methods used in different paradigms thus also differ and need to be evaluated on how well they achieve the goals of the particular paradigm. I believe that taking seriously our responsibility to improve our research methods depends on this understanding.

Because there is much debate over terms used to designate different research methods—and much slippage in the use of terms often within the same article—let me begin by saying that I don't think any of the terms

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used to discriminate methods are very useful. As Charney points out, qualitative and quantitative methods are more productively seen as complementary or overlapping, rather than diametrically opposed (582). Quantitative methods include, but are not restricted to, empirical (experimental) methods, and are not exclusively "scientific" (in a disciplinary sense). Both quantitative and qualitative methods can be observational or experimental and both are used in at least some of the sciences. Ethnographic methods (sometimes equated with qualitative methods) are simply a collection of methods that have been used in ethnographic studies (studies of culture): they include qualitative, quantitative, experimental, observational, and scientific methods, as well as interactive, reflective, and action methods, and others.

What are termed objective and subjective methods in Charney's article are especially difficult to define and prone to slippage, perhaps because of the stigma still attached to the notion of subjectivity. Early in her article, Charney argues that "objectivity...is not a fixed feature of particular methods" (570), but later she closely links objectivity with empirical and quantitative methods—"an objective, quantitative method" (580); "objective, scientific, or experimental methods" (581); "objective categorical data" (582); "formalized objective methods" (587); "systematic objective methods" (588)—and opposes such methods to subjective methods, which "if [they] are truly local and context bound, if they are deliberately disqualified as grounds for reliable or valid generalizations...cannot extend a discipline's repertoire of methods or deepen its knowledge" (589). In this slippage from the use of objectivity to refer to a criterion of good research to its use to designate preferred methods, what is elided is the distinction between the goals of different research paradigms. While some rather fundamental differences in perspective separate what Charney calls empirical or objective research from critical research, it is simply not the case that the one relies, as she claims, on public and sharable methods while the other relies on private and idiosyncratic methods.

As with research methods, there is debate over how to distinguish different paradigms of research, but the distinctions among paradigms are clearer and less contended. In their discussion of "Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research," Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln contrast positivism and post-positivism with critical theory and constructivism (*Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994, pp. 105–17). For brevity's sake (and because the researchers Charney criticizes operate under the assumptions of either critical theory or constructivism), I'd like to conflate the latter two categories into what I will call the *critical paradigm*, and contrast it with the *post-positivist paradigm*, which is the one assumed by Charney though she does not give it

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this name. Surprisingly to some, the critical and post-positivist paradigms do share some ontological and epistemological assumptions. Because post-positivism developed in response to critiques of positivism's naive realism and dualism, like the critical paradigm, as Charney notes, post-positivism holds to social constructivist, relativistic, and indeterminate notions of knowledge. Post-positivists, as Charney explains, "do not assume that their methods ensure certainty and universally generalizable results" (579), but they do strive for context-dependent generalizations, which derive from researchers "striving to do similar things in similar situations and to produce reliably similar results" (588). Their methods pay attention to individuality in order to make sure that the situations and samples studied are representative; post-positivism assumes that "the individuals involved in a study (including the researcher) are idiosyncratic, unpredictable, subject to biases, and unrepresentative of a group" (584) and methods are developed to correct for these factors which are problematic for the goals of this research paradigm. The generalizations that are produced are not meant to be normative or predictive of any individual's behavior or any particular situation: "claims about the group as a whole are not assumed to hold of each member" (584–85). Generalizations are tested and refined by researchers' "replicating, challenging, reanalyzing and extending each other's data" (588); generalizations build on each other and, as Karl Popper says, knowledge grows (574). Because of the emphasis on context-dependent generalizations, post-positivism also demands an "impersonal stance" of the researcher who employs methods to minimize "the chances of influencing participants to adapt to his or her predispositions.... [and] to reduce the effect of biases by limiting and systematizing interactions" (585).

In contrast to post-positivism, the critical paradigm does not strive for context-dependent generalizations but rather for more informed, sophisticated, and historically dependent constructions. Methods are designed to investigate the complexities of individual situations in order to enlarge disciplines' understanding of the range of variation in individual behavior and cultures that occurs. Generalization is a matter of noting similarities across situations that share significant "social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender circumstances," and "one important mechanism for transfer of knowledge from one setting to another is the provision of vicarious experience" (Guba and Lincoln 114). Because of the emphasis on understanding the differences among individuals and cultures, the critical paradigm demands that researchers interact with participants. Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw make clear how the method of participant observation contributes to the goal of understanding the particular situation the researcher is involved in: "Rather than detracting from what the fieldworker can learn, first-hand relations with those studied may pro-

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vide clues to understanding the more subtle, implicit underlying assumptions that are often not readily accessible through observation or interview methods alone" (*Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995, p. 3). Indeed, some of the most crucial insights of an ethnographic study often result from moments of culture clash, or misunderstandings, that arise when researchers and participants interact and discover that their "ways of doing and giving meaning" (Emerson et al. 215) are radically different. In critical research, researchers' "predispositions" are not regarded as factors to be controlled for in order that they not "skew the results" (Charney 587), but rather are regarded as stimuli whose effects should be observed. Patricia A. Sullivan has similarly argued for "(critical) self-reflexivity...in composition studies of writing communities," for "if our status is presumed as a given at the outset of study rather than as a formation in relationship to an other, we may miss opportunities to learn how we are being constructed and the effects such constructions have on the other literacies we then 'uncover'" ("Ethnography and the Problem of the Other," *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy*, ed. Peter Mortensen and Gesa Kirsch, Urbana: NCTE, 1996, pp. 106–07).

Research methods are designed to achieve the goals of particular paradigms of research; this is why the criteria of paradigm fit—using methods that depend on and further the goals of the research paradigm—is so important in doing good research. Charney questions "subjectivist critics like Blyler and Herndl" who oppose what she calls remedies for private subjectivist methods, but whether phenomenological methods such as triangulation are appropriate and how they are used in a qualitative study depends on which paradigm the research is assuming. Herndl's complaint about the use of triangulation in ethnographies is a question of paradigm fit: if the goal of triangulation is to compensate for individual errors in observation rather than to elucidate how different perspectives produce different understandings and contribute to the overall complexity or sophistication of the account of the culture studied, triangulation furthers the goals of post-positivism rather than critical research. Sullivan notes how "triangulation is introduced prescriptively as a systematic check on the researcher's subjectivity" as a result of "our own professional anxiety, a story that encodes our conflicted response to the promise ethnographic research seemed to hold for studies of the social contexts of writing and the threat it portended to normal (empirical) science" (101).

Similarly, the relationship between the researcher and the participants, and the representation of that relationship, primarily reflect the assumptions of the research paradigm, not the personal attitude or ethics of the researcher. The impersonal and distant stance of the post-positivist researcher reflects that paradigm's valuing of context-dependent generalizations, just as the

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interaction of critical researcher with participants reflects that paradigm's valuing of the understanding of cultural and individual difference. Though an ideological effect of the impersonal stance of post-positivist researchers may be to implicitly elevate the researcher above the people studied, it is wrong to assume that "methodological choices" are "reliable indicators" of the morality or personality of individual researchers (582). Charney notes that "If we grant that experimentalists depersonalize their published accounts partly because their credibility depends on constructing an ethos of disinterested competence, then we should also grant that ethnographers invest their accounts with personality partly to establish an ethos of caring and to create an air of mise-en-scène" (583). But as Guba and Lincoln make clear, the "voice" chosen by the researcher is intended to align their stance with the demands of the research paradigm. The overriding purpose of the construction of ethos in research writing is not textual self-representation but the representation of the goals and standards of the research paradigm (which, like all other social practices, are ideological but at the same time systematic).

Despite what Charney implies (587–91), critical researchers, like post-positivist researchers, discuss extensively how to achieve objectivity (also called credibility, reliability, or validity) in their work. Drawing on the work of Theodore Porter and Karl Popper, Charney explains how objectivity enables the social production of knowledge: "Objective methods, and the information they yield, tend to be public, available for acquisition and scrutiny.... By operating within the constraints of formalized conventions for collecting and interpreting data, researchers create the potential for communal scrutiny and refinement of disciplinary work" (570, 588). Similarly, in their discussion of "Criteria for Assessing Interpretive Validity in Qualitative Research," David Altheide and John Johnson note that "we must have a logic for assessing and communicating the interactive process through which the investigator acquired the research experience and information" (*Handbook*, Denzin and Lincoln, p. 485). And Janice Lauer and Patricia Sullivan point out that such a concern for objectivity extends even to research in historical and hermeneutical studies, "in which interpretations are carefully elaborated so that the community can understand, assess, and it is hoped, adopt them as preferable ways of symbolizing the social situation or the textual patterns under study" (*Professional Communication: The Social Perspective*, ed. Nancy Blyler and Charlotte Thralls, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993, p. 166).

The claim that objective methods and formalized conventions owe their authoritative status to the way they enable disciplinary research is precisely what Carl Herndl is arguing in one of the articles critiqued by Charney. Discussing the rhetorical and textual strategies of Stephen Doheny-Farina's

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ethnography of an emerging organization, Herndl notes, "As written texts, they are part of an institutionally maintained discourse authorized not by their relationship to fact, but by their participation in the rhetoric shared by their community of readers" ("Writing Ethnography," *CE* 53, 1991, p. 322). Herndl goes on to point out the various "formalized conventions for collecting and interpreting data" (Charney 588) used by ethnographers: Doheny-Farina "locates his work within the research tradition" (Herndl 324) through citations of relevant research and through the use of "disciplinary constructs" in analyzing the interactions in the organization, and he employs both the arrival story and citations to his fieldnotes that maintain the "double movement" of ethnographic research: "both the grounding in personal experience and the objectivity of description" (Herndl 326). As Herndl says, the citation of fieldnotes amounts to "the claim that Doheny-Farina was there and that had we been there we too would have seen the same thing" (326).

Methods of research that allow truth claims to be assessed and understood by others not only contribute to the communal work of a discipline but also contribute to the process of the social construction of understanding. Critical education researchers Michael Schratz and Rob Walker agree with Charney that objectivity does not result from the use of particular methods:

> 'Objectivity' is not an absolute value enshrined in the application of certain research procedures and practices but arises from the struggle to free oneself from prejudice and bias.... 'Objectivity'...is not a condition that can be assured by compliance with procedures, but an honesty and truth that can be achieved only by conscious critical effort and with difficulty. (*Research as Social Change*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 122).

Objectivity in this sense is the goal of all good research. But the particular methods employed to assure objectivity, and the way they are employed, differ in different paradigms. As I mentioned earlier, both the critical and the post-positivist paradigms assume that knowledge is provisional, not certain or absolute, and that knowledge is socially constructed. And thus both paradigms recognize what Charney says rhetorical theory reminds us of: "that while facts may never be represented neutrally, the values associated with them are not preordained" (576). The arguments of the critics Charney analyzes—Carl Herndl, Nancy Blyler, Paul Dombrowski, Mary Lay—are all designed to call attention to the ways in which certain kinds of facts, or knowledge, or even paradigms of research, have come to be associated with certain values and, through analyzing these historical and contingent, not preordained, links to enable us to find ways to reform our research in more productive directions.

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