

## **Between Prescription and Action: The Gap between the Theory and the Practice of Qualitative Inquiries<sup>1</sup>**

*Esther Wiesenfeld*

**Key words:**  
qualitative  
research,  
researchers place,  
critics, participants'  
co-involvement,  
researchers  
subjectivity

**Abstract:** Recent research approaches in psychology, such as emancipatory, cooperative, constructionist, participatory-action-research, and critical ethnographic research, coincide in proposing a relationship between the researcher and his/her informants characterized by symmetry, dialog, cooperation, and mutual respect, as well as the co-involvement of both participants' subjectivity throughout the research process. Though this way of conceiving their relationship suggests an epistemology which diverges from the one that has oriented traditional research, we wonder how far this new mode of relating is being carried into practice, how much it is being understood, and how it is being implemented.

In this paper, and based on a review of theoretical works, empirical reports on qualitative research, and my own research experience, I try to contribute some information on the different meanings and forms these proposals are taking in practice, as well as the different procedures that are being applied to fulfill them. The diversity so encountered leads to a questioning of the interaction between research practice and the epistemology implicit in the approaches in question, and hence, to a call for a review of either the assumptions on which the researcher-informant relationship is based or the way they are being put into practice.

### **Table of Contents**

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. The Researcher-Subject Relationship in Quantitative Methodology](#)
- [3. Qualitative Inquiry](#)
  - [3.1 Background](#)
  - [3.2 The researcher-informant relationship in qualitative research](#)
  - [3.3 The practice of qualitative research](#)
- [4. Conclusions](#)
- [References](#)
- [Author](#)
- [Citation](#)

## **1. Introduction**

Almost three decades after the well-known crisis of social psychology, which intensified the controversy over the positivist paradigm's applicability to psychology, we can now state that the field is witnessing a growing insistence on, and acceptance of, the interpretive paradigms as an alternative way to approach and know reality. [1]

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the Central Symposium: *New Methodologies in Psychology*, in the XXVII Interamerican Congress of Psychology. Caracas, June 27-July 2, 1999

This paradigm shift also involves the use of qualitative methodology as a research strategy, in opposition to quantitative methodology and its emphasis on ensuring the objectivity of the research process and the truthfulness, validity, and generalizing power of its results. We are speaking, then, of a methodological proposal which runs counter to the beliefs in the existence of an objective reality, which is independent of our experiences of it; of objectivity as the privileged way of gaining access to that reality, and of apprehending the object of study in a value-neutral way, through a relationship which maintains a distance between the researcher—the subject who knows—and the object to be known. [2]

This does not mean that the new paradigm denies reality, but it does reject the idea of its existence as an absolute condition, external and separate from us, context independent, to which we react. Reality, according to this paradigm, is conceived in terms of the meanings it has for us, which are constructed and reconstructed as a result of our changing experiences and other social practices (IBAÑEZ, 1994). Concurring with MILLER and GLASSNER "research cannot provide the mirror reflection of the social world that positivists strive for, but it may provide access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences in the social world" (1997, p.100). [3]

In addition, qualitative methodology calls for a close relationship among the different participants in the process being studied, which in turn implies a far different attitude and role for the researcher. [4]

This latter issue—the researcher's place in Qualitative Research (QR)—is the central focus of this article. To address it, I have defined the following objectives: 1) to express certain critiques of the characteristics of quantitative research, especially those relating to the subject-researcher relationship; 2) to outline qualitative research's proposals on that relationship; and 3) to critically analyze the implementation of those proposals, based on a review of theoretical works and research reports based on them. [5]

## **2. The Researcher-Subject Relationship in Quantitative Methodology**

The researcher-subject relationship in the different stages of the research process is among the issues for which quantitative methodology has been broadly criticized. It has been argued that quantitative methodology is characterized by a method of inquiry, research, and publication which attempts to avoid gender, racial, or social class-based bias and achieve scientific neutrality. This position is reflected in the publication standards of the American Psychological Association (APA), which demands a reporting style that provides evidence of the required distance between the researcher and the subjects of his/her study; said distance is assumed to maximize the likelihood of the desired neutrality (SCOTT & KATZ, 1995). Still another reflection is found in LEUDAR and ANTAKI (1996), who call for a one-way research which treats data not contaminated by the researcher as good data. Among the strategies used to achieve that goal is the omission of any reference to both participants in the reports. [6]

BILLIG (1994) called this strategy "depopulation of the subject in psychosocial reports" and illustrates it with an analysis of the articles appearing in the first two issues of the European Journal of Social Psychology (EJSP) for 1991. BILLIG identified impersonal forms of reference to the subjects, the author, the latter's colleagues and interviewers, the procedure applied for the "random" choice of the sample, and the description of the sample members in terms of gender, age, and social class. All this is methodologically justified by the idea that greater detail would weaken the image of homogeneity, and hence, the potential for generalization from the data. The subjects are treated as a homogeneous group of people, any one of whom could be replaced by any other, as if the rest of the factors—which are precisely the discipline's object of interest—were identical for all. Chance is then expected to help dissipate any possibility that individual differences might lead to error. [7]

WALSH BOWERS (1995) did a study similar to BILLIG's, based on 3,001 research reports in the different areas of interpersonal psychology, published at 10-year intervals between 1939 and 1989 in seven U.S. journals and one Canadian journal. He focused on two major dimensions: 1) forms of relationship between the researcher and the subjects; and 2) forms of writing and designating, or providing information on, the participants (gender, surroundings, type of participant). He concluded that the reports are depersonalized and the researchers use their subjects as sources of data without reporting on the latter's consent, feedback, or any other reaction. Neither do they describe the interviewers or the surroundings in which the study was conducted; the scientists use the passive voice and even remove informal speech from the report to make it look more serious, and hence, publishable. This happens at every stage of description of the research: methodology, analysis, results. Along the same lines, ULICHNY (1997) has pointed out that the researcher-informant relationship is obscured in social psychology texts. [8]

These findings have been viewed as evidence of researchers' fear of including any signs of rhetoric which might inhibit their access to "the truth" or taint objective reports with biases associated with literary, political, or other kinds of rhetoric (BAZERMAN, 1988). [9]

The characteristics outlined above have been questioned in regard to a number of aspects. One of these is to challenge the ability to obviate or neutralize the researcher's presence; it has been argued that even in experimental situations in which the subjects are assumed to be abstracted out of all context, they are actually situated in the researcher's argumentative intention and act in his/her presence (BILLIG, 1994). [10]

Another critique is aimed at the attempt to homogenize subjects, whose individuality and daily experience—of interest to psychologists—are eliminated in favor of statistical generalization. This rhetoric of traditional psychology, based on the concept of the reality of the "facts," removes the subjects from what FOUCAULT called ordinary day-to-day individuality (1979, p.91); examples are the well-known references to "the Experimenter" and "the Subjects." Consistent

with this principle, the conventional report excludes the subject's textual constructions, and in his/her name it poses the omnipotence of the—paradoxically absent—researcher, who interprets subjects with whom he/she had no more than a distant relationship, using the passive voice and depersonalized, decontextualized, forms of expression to avoid an undesirable presence which would undermine the seriousness and credibility of the text. [11]

BAZERMAN (1988, cited by WALSH BOWERS), questions this truth-seeking effort, arguing that rhetoric is never absent from any kind of report, including scientific reports. He agrees with SCOTT and KATZ (1995) to the effect that research reports take no notice of the researcher's private efforts, while scientist ideology is characterized by a standardized sequence of communications and epistemological assumptions and relations among writers, editors, judges, and readers, which refuses to accept this kind of rhetoric. [12]

In addition, the linguistic patterns used by psychologists in their reports are not discussed in their publications. This is a limiting factor, since as indicated by the advocates of the "rhetoric of research" movement (SHOTTER, 1993), academic writings—particularly in the human and social sciences—have their own persuasive rhetoric, and that what is written builds the discipline (BAZERMAN, 1988). [13]

Still another critique, tied to the researcher's absence in these reports, refers to the absence of references on issues of ethical responsibility and concern for "the subjects'" dignity and well-being, which responsibility comes into being when "others" are described in the research reports and meaning is attributed to their actions. This approach is equivalent to the mentality characteristic of the colonizer-colonized relationship (ULICHNY, 1997; WALSH BOWERS, 1995), or that of illumination (MORGAN, 1996) whereby the subject who knows illuminates the object to be known. These authors warn of the danger of developing theories and practices with important implications for the life of the people being studied, of which the latter have no knowledge. They argue that this kind of "scientific knowledge" not only ignores the subjects' context, but also, by attributing a set of characteristics to the subjects it constructs them in a way which usually diverges from the meanings they themselves formulate regarding their feelings, thoughts, and social practices and which frequently stigmatizes them (MARECEK, FINE & KIDDER, 1997; IBANEZ, 1994). [14]

This confused and asymmetrical relationship in which the researcher adopts an attitude of arrogance and enormous responsibility by assuming that he/she can speak for "the other" and accurately interpret the latter's world and life, accompanied by a false modesty which keeps the researcher from appearing in the reports he/she writes, reveals that the imposition of identity by paradigms which demand neutrality—in the full knowledge of the difficulties and fallacies that position implies—does not work adequately (WALKERDINE, 1990, p.198, cited by BROWN, 1997, p.699). In response, the critics call for the removal of the barriers which separate the researcher from the objects of his/her study, in both

language and the process of collecting and reporting the information (LEUDAR & ANTAKI, 1996). [15]

The critiques outlined above, and the suggestions for overcoming the shortcomings of conventional methodology, stem basically from proposals associated with what could be called alternative or emerging paradigms, among whose features is the use of qualitative inquiry. [16]

### **3. Qualitative Inquiry**

#### **3.1 Background**

The use of the term "qualitative research" (QR) or "qualitative inquiry" (QI) goes back as far as the beginning of the 20th Century, in such disciplines as sociology and anthropology. Since that time research of this kind has been done at different stages of history and in varying ways in a large number of the human sciences (education, psychology, social work, social communication), paradigms (feminism, cultural studies, postpositivism), theoretical approaches (ethnomethodology, phenomenology, critical theory, neo-Marxism, poststructuralism, constructionism), research strategies (grounded theory, case study, ethnography, participatory-action research, constructionist research), data collection methods (interview, observation, life story), and analytical techniques (semiotics, hermeneutics, speech analysis, content analysis). [17]

The current period is witnessing a proliferation of alternative ways of conceiving reality and legitimating forms of knowledge and social practices which support political and moral commitments to build a better world (KENDALL & MICHAEL, 1997). [18]

In psychology, its expression has been most visible in the development of different versions of postmodern social psychology such as critical social psychology (BURMAN, 1997a, 1997b; PRILLELTENSKY, 1994; WEXLER, 1991; PARKER, 1997; IBANEZ & INIGUEZ, 1997), liberation social psychology (MARTIN BARO, 1985; THOMAS, 1998), emancipatory social psychology (SAMPSON, 1991, 1993), and in such recent and innovative areas as gender psychology, political psychology, community social psychology, and the psychology of poverty. [19]

Though the difficulty of defining and characterizing this group of tendencies is clearly recognized, considering the heterogeneity of the positions which fall within it, all of them share the following: 1) a critique of the metatheory and the grand narratives of positivism, which are to be replaced by local and contextual understanding of the studied processes; 2) a commitment to varying forms of social constructionism and progressive policies, involving solidarity with the exploited and oppressed populations, to which end theory and research are to be complemented by actions designed to induce social change and emancipation; 3) interest in discursive practice and communication; 4) the use of linguistic resources and conventions to permit a reconceptualization of the ideas of self

and other social processes which are socially constructed by the world; 5) a critique of the researcher's interventionist role in the production of knowledge and his/her paradoxical absence from his/her own research reports; 6) the use of qualitative research methods, and others (GERGEN, 1996; BRYDON-MILLER, 1997; KENDALL & MICHAEL, 1997; SPEARS, 1997; POTTER & WETHERELL, 1995, 1997; SARBIN, 1986; SHOTTER & GERGEN, 1989). [20]

### **3.2 The researcher-informant relationship in qualitative research**

There is a consensus whereby QR is conceived as a field of inquiry in itself (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 1994), which attempts to apprehend the meaning underlying what we say about what we do, on the basis of the exploration, elaboration, and systematization of the meanings of a phenomenon, problem, or topic (BANISTER, BURMAN, PARKER, TAYLOR & TINDALL, 1994) and an analysis thereof for the purpose of their transformation. [21]

Among the most striking features of this kind of research—especially with regard to the researcher-informant relationship—are the following:

1. QR is favorable to the study of processes in their natural surroundings, since it posits that processes are inseparable from their context and that their understanding must therefore be rooted in the personal characteristics and experience of the participants, their personal histories, gender, race, etc. (TOLMAN & BRYDON-MILLER, 1997. [22]
2. These processes are interpreted in terms of the meanings people give them. Accordingly, the aim is to gain access to information emerging from the informants' common-sense knowledge, rather than start with categories defined in advance by the researcher. In other words, it is inductive in nature (MANNING, 1997). [23]
3. It is acknowledged that direct access to the personal experience of the research subjects is impossible, so importance is attributed to language, the power of speech, narrative, and texts, as building blocks of reality (IBAÑEZ, 1994). [24]
4. The interpretation of the phenomena studied is multivocal and dialog-based, since it is grounded in the constructions of the different participants, including those of the researcher. No particular discourse is given a privileged status, so the researcher's point of view does not prevail over that of the informant, but is rather treated as just one more interpretation. This does not mean that professional's knowledge and expertise is disregarded. On the contrary, it means that our training provides us with the tools for approaching, getting acquainted with, observing, interviewing, our informants in their contexts. It also means that we have our own experiences and understandings, which derive, among others, from our training. But these do not entitle us to assume we can interpret others, whose contexts, lives and experiences we do not share. It does not entitle us either, for applying questionnaires or interviews on variables or topics we have chosen, regardless of their relevance for our subjects. This position does not imply our ignorance, but it does imply that

what we know we put in service of others who open their hearts, feelings and thoughts to us. [25]

5. Research is understood, then, as a relational process, in that each participant's construction shapes and is shaped by that of his/her interlocutor. [26]
6. It is reflexive in that it permits the analysis of the influence exerted by the process on oneself and others (RICHARDSON, 1995). [27]
7. It is also subjective, since it recognizes the particular bias of the researcher's own history and its influence on his/her approach to the object of study and interpretation of the informants' stories. Further, it accepts the researcher's sharing with his/her informants in the personal, professional, and political spheres (GERGEN, 1990). [28]
8. Knowledge rests, then, on shared experience, known through dialog (REASON, 1994). Accordingly, the results of this kind of research are expected to be negotiated products or co-constructions built by the researcher and his/her informants, both parties being conceived as active participants in the process (MANNING, 1997). [29]
9. Viewed in this way, the research itself implies mutual learning, which is of benefit to the different participants (Kendall & Michael, 1997) as well as to the discipline. It facilitates joint efforts to foster social change and the emancipation of minority groups (TOLMAN & BRYDON, 1997), as one of the aims of the professionals committed to this approach (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 1994; BANISTER et al., 1994). [30]

As is clear from the foregoing description, qualitative research calls for a researcher-informant relationship in which the informants' life experience and the meanings they attribute to it are reported in a climate of equality in which mutual respect and reflexive dialog prevail and the researcher can legitimately involve his/her own subjectivity in the process. The aim is not to idealize the other's knowledge or underestimate one's own knowledge as a researcher by viewing oneself as ignorant of the common-sense knowledge one seeks to understand, but rather, to try to share knowledge, reflect jointly on it, and derive learning from it which can be turned into useful knowledge and actions capable of inducing transformations in the informants' lives and in the theoretical development of the discipline through publications and exchanges between the researchers and their peers (TOLMAN & BRYDON, 1995). [31]

### **3.3 The practice of qualitative research**

The growing popularity of QR in psychology during the last several years has also recently elicited a variety of proposals and critiques on how to implement the methodology in the different phases of research. That implies the need to review the principles which orient this research strategy, either to strengthen them and generate proposals to orient the researchers in the field or to reformulate them in order to adapt them to the possibilities offered by the practice of QR. [32]

Although we acknowledge that the different disciplines in the field of psychology approach this type of research in different ways, based on their particular interests, and apply varying research strategies, we will analyze certain general points we consider common to all of them: What is happening in the practice of qualitative research? To what extent have the characteristics described above been implemented, and hence, the critiques of the positivist methodology been overcome? How has the presence of both informants and researchers been treated in qualitative research reports? How has the researcher's subjectivity been expressed? How has the informants' diversity and uniqueness been defended? How have the voices of the participants (including that of the researcher), the interaction among them, the analysis and interpretation of that information, and the discussion of the linguistic practices used by the researcher been incorporated into the reports? [33]

I have based my analysis of these issues on a review of theoretical articles on qualitative inquiry published in qualitative methodology texts (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 1994; MORSE, 1994) and psychological journals (*Theory and Psychology, Journal of Social Issues, Qualitative Inquiry, American Journal of Community Psychology, AVEPSO Journal*), reports on qualitative research projects, and my own experience in research of this kind. As shown below, this analysis suggests that application of the characteristics of researcher-informant relationship in QR (symmetry, dialog, multivocality, coauthorship, contextualization of the results, narrations which describe the researcher's subjective experience, overcoming of the researcher's anonymity) has been by no means an easy task. [34]

In fact:

1. Considering that a) the researcher is the person who generally chooses and approaches a context with which he/she becomes familiar, but that is not the case for the informants in that context, b) that the researcher is motivated by certain purposes which—though they may be negotiated or modified in the course of the interaction—define him/her as the promoter of a process, c) that the researcher has access to the informants' subjectivity and intimacy as a result of his/her training to inquire, argue, and report, and that d) in general the researcher asks and the informants answer but not the reverse, we are forced to admit that this is not a symmetrical relationship. [35]

Moreover, the researcher publishes and gains prestige and professional recognition based on the lives of other people, but the informants obtain no such benefit (CHATAWAY, 1997; ULICHNY, 1997; MANNING, 1997). [36]

According to KENDALL and MICHAEL (1997), the need for the work to be accepted by peers whose ways of life differ greatly from those of the characters in the stories to which they gain access implies the additional disadvantage of trapping the researcher within a set of methodological rules which, paradoxically, lead him/her to raise barriers to the experience he/she wishes to approach and understand. [37]



Along these lines, the expectations for QR's impact vary among the two parties. On the one hand, there is the hope that the research will generate changes in the discursive constructions and/or actions of the informants, that it will foster liberating transformations; on the other, the researcher is expected to generate a theoretical product he/she aspires to publish in specialized publications far removed from the participants who made it possible, in terms of the technical language employed and the type of publication in which the research will appear. [38]

It is important to note that the voice of the "other" whom the research is intended to capture is channeled in ways that are limited to a reading of the experiences and do not lead to beneficial actions; in other words, the voice is recovered only to be silenced again, among the readers of the scientific texts which report the informants' experiences, and the message is circumscribed to that group of readers. [39]

Taking the example of the work of speech analysts who identify discursive strategies that contribute to silencing, resisting, or reproducing relations of oppression, it runs counter to the principles of emancipatory psychology for the informants not to be furnished with that knowledge, but for it rather to be restricted to a limited group of people who will not use it for the purpose of fostering the change suggested by the critiques of the discipline. [40]

2. In second place, considering that a) one of the most frequent ways to introduce the informants' voice into qualitative research is through quotes from their speech, which are selected, analyzed, interpreted, and reported by the researcher, b) even though the use of those quotes may have been previously discussed and negotiated with those informants, and c) in the opinion of ULICHNY (1997) it should be so, because the researcher is the one with the responsibility and authority to represent the community or situation and assign meaning to the informants' actions, this method reinforces the lack of symmetry and dialog to the extent that the participants do not play a role in the interpretation of their own speech. [41]
3. Furthermore, when the researcher bases his/her analysis on quotes that are usually abstracted from the context of dialog in which they were expressed (SAMPSON, 1993) and does not identify the quoted informants beyond indicating their gender, age, or other general conditions, he/she is depopulating the subject in a way resembling the positivist practice that has been so strongly criticized (BILLIG, 1994). This is not a relationship which takes account of the context and the diversity of the participants either. [42]
4. This double writing form in which quotes from the informants' speech are preceded or followed by the analyst's interpretations suggests that two subjectivities are being revealed and that the analyst's subjectivity is supposedly interpreting that of the informants. But a) the analyst's comments or thoughts which motivated the speech being quoted, b) the analyst's position vis-a-vis the subject matter, c) his/her personal context which leads him/her to understand as he/she does and not otherwise, d) the impact of the experience on his personal and professional life are not reported (even if he/she does so report as regards the informants), we may conclude that the

report of this analysis tends to conceal the researcher's reflexivity and underestimate his/her influence on the co-construction of the speech being analyzed (LEUDAR & ANTAKI, 1996). [43]

The foregoing implies that the changes in the researcher's personal and professional life, in his/her teaching and establishment of more democratic relations with his/her students, and in his/her form of reporting, remain cloaked in anonymity. [44]

It has been pointed out that, even in ethnographic studies, which traditionally included a description of the researchers' experience, of how they felt and behaved in their field work, in their reports, those descriptions have generally been relegated to prefaces and separate sections (DENZIN, 1996; RICHARDSON, 1995). That amounts to a major omission from a paradigm which recognizes that the investigator's very presence influences the speech and social practice of his/her interlocutors, and vice versa (MORGAN, 1996). [45]

As a way to disseminate these points of view, MARECEK, FINE & KIDDER (1997) propose writing reports which contain reflections on previous experiences that have already been published. In my judgment, doing so instead of including those thoughts in the same report only reinforces the researcher's anonymity, both in the course of the research projects being reported on and in their dissemination. [46]

One of the examples found in the literature which incorporates an analysis of the personal impact of a research activity on the participants is reported by BRINTON-LYKES (1997). The author analyzed an experience she called activist participatory research, conducted with a group of Mayas in Guatemala. In that study she reported the personal effects she received from having lived with that group of people under conditions of war for over 36 years. She believes her relationship with them can be understood as that of "The Situated other," in recognition of the fact that her origin and interests made her an external agent vis-a-vis the members of the group, though one who over time integrated with them, influenced them, and was influenced by them; that allowed her, over time, to become an internal and external agent simultaneously. [47]

ULICHNY (1997) agrees with this double positioning of researchers, based on what he considers their temporal affiliations and the multiple roles which must be played over the period of interaction with the informants. [48]

Contrary to the position taken by BRINTON LYKES and ULICHNY, Alejandro MORENO not only considers it possible to cease to be an external agent, but also views it as necessary to understanding the *Other*. For MORENO the only way to accede hermeneutically to what he calls the "popular episteme" (MORENO, 1993) is to insert and implicate oneself within the world in which the population being studied lives. That is feasible, in his view, only through the strategy he calls "shared research." An illustration of this is the book titled *Historia de Vida de Felicia Valera* (Felicia Valera's Life Story) of which MORENO is coauthor (MORENO et. al, 1998) along with other members of the community in which he lives and with which he does research. [49]

5. Additionally, if as RICHARDSON (1995) says, the advent of poststructuralism has legitimated narrative and the researcher's personal agendas, beliefs, and values, it may be an ethical duty to extend our self-reflection to our own ways of writing. He has proposed the incorporation of new forms of narrative which make it possible to describe the emotions and the wealth of information obtained through qualitative research strategies which transmit the stories that people want to reveal and which comprise their normal way of communicating (EISNER, 1997). Still, reports continue to be written in ways that satisfy the criteria imposed by the traditional scientific journals, and we must accept that even now, psychologists have not expressed the transformative impact of the place of language in the human sciences (SCOTT & KATZ, 1995). [50]

In this respect RICHARDSON (1995) suggests reporting on the influence of the process on each participant through first person narrations and commentaries in the text. In his view this procedure demystifies the writing process for students and expands readers' understanding. He even proposes writing in different ways for different audiences. [51]

One of the few works found in which the authors describe their experiences in novel ways is that of FINLEY & KNOWLES (1995), who reported on a research project in which they were themselves informants. The topic was that of artistic experience among researchers and research experience among artists. The authors described their artistic experiences and also collected narrations by other researchers and artists on the influence of art on their respective views of the world. The article has several starting places and the authors provide instructions on how to read it, making clear that the narrative style they adopted represents an alternative to the traditional style which omits art from the examination of the processes on which it focuses. [52]

Other such proposals include making reference to the different ways to position oneself in the dialog, and including a description of the narrator's context when reconstructing his/her dialog with his/her informants (LEUDAR & ANTAKI, 1996). [53]

Though it is true that these suggestions recognize the researcher's presence in the text, there is no clarification in them of how the participants will gain access to the reports or of the participants' influence in the production thereof. To accomplish those goals, it would be necessary to consider the possibility of coauthorship in different contexts (community, academic) (LINCOLN, 1997; HERON & REASON, 1997), or for the participants in the process themselves to write their own reports (GERGEN, 1997). In this respect, a few days ago I received a communication from the *Journal of Community, Work and Family*, published in England, inviting nonprofessionals to send articles to it; that shows how important it is to make a valued place for the informants in contexts of dissemination limited to professionals. [54]

The case of Alejandro MORENO described above is an example of that possibility. [55]

Still, we may wonder: if this proposal is an indication of our insistence on symmetry, should we not consult with the people involved regarding their desire to write these reports, especially in connection with populations who

must often concentrate on meeting basic needs—among which the writing of reports is not included? [56]

6. Still another point which has been questioned is that the theory-practice linkage proposed for emancipatory research has not been expressed, either due to the priority placed on theoretical production (ULICHNY, 1997) or because experience is reported but not theorized upon (WIESENFELD, 1997). [57]

There is even criticism of the fact that reports on qualitative research are often used as arguments for or against theoretical postures in debates among peers (LEUDAR & ANTAKI, 1996), which cause them to diverge from the practical purposes which presumably motivate this type of research. [58]

An exception to that trend is the attempt to integrate theory and action undertaken by ULICHNY (1997), who from the perspective of critical ethnography and participatory-action research accompanied high school students and teachers on an educational reform project posing the "reform or transform" dilemma. Critical ethnography allowed him to understand the ethnic perspectives of the different participants and explain the project's evolution within a complex social structure. Action was encouraged, in his view, by his public expressions of understanding and positioning vis-a-vis the subject of discussion. [59]

7. It is also worth while to mention some postmodern social psychologists' critique of the stratification, dispersion, and individualization of professionals, whose isolated actions are inimical to the principles they advocate. These are: fostering a movement which questions the principles that reproduce social arrangements which legitimate oppression, including the difficulty encountered by the proponents of movements critical of the discipline in opening up areas for academic discussion and confrontation (KENDALL & MICHAEL, 1997). Related to this, WEXLER (1991) has pointed out that in academia we reproduce oppressive practices similar to those generated in society as a whole among groups with and without power (political, economic). He refers specifically to the relationship between the so-called hard sciences and the social sciences. [60]
8. Finally, and in relation to the preceding point, if QR advocates ethical and moral principles oriented by the desire to make a better world for the oppressed (KENDALL & MICHAEL, 1997), why are those principles not also applied to the researcher in his/her personal and academic life? For example, if the aim is to stimulate social or community participation and the researcher is convinced of the process's desirability, why is his/her experience with the people with whom he/she works not translated into similar practices vis-a-vis his/her reference groups (neighbors, colleagues)? Why, in professional practice, in academia or at public or private institutions, do we not apply the principles articulated by QR regarding the researcher-informant relationship in our relations with colleagues, students, and other interlocutors, as a way of sharing experiences and thereby enriching our own professional practice, by promoting desired changes in these contexts? [61]

There was an experience which attempted to link theory and practice by generating a discussion movement on the practice of community social psychology, in the form of an elective course for undergraduate psychology students and postgraduate social psychology students. The content was structured in accordance with the interests and concerns of the participants, including mine as an educator. The agenda consisted of analysis of narratives of community psychosocial experiences by the students and community members, with a view to understanding and contrasting the relationship between the theoretical and methodological elements of the discipline from the practical point of view. As a side benefit of the weekly encounters, a goal was adopted: of fostering a sense of community among the participants similar to the one we try to encourage among the members of the communities in which we carry out community actions, as a way to harmonize the principles which guide that practice with academic and personal lives. [62]

#### **4. Conclusions**

This paper reflects my critical understanding of the inconsistencies among the principles governing the researcher-informant relationship in QR. Part of that understanding is a concern over the implementation of qualitative inquiry: Are we repeating practices similar to those of the researchers who apply quantitative methodology that we criticize? It is possible to do it any other way? Are we witnessing a crisis of qualitative inquiry? [63]

On concluding the writing of this article I have come to realize that I too have been speaking for others, interpreting their speech without making a place for the voices of the authors, so as to determine whether they agree with my interpretation of their writings and their thoughts on the subject or not. [64]

I have also come to realize that I have not expressed my own position: on whether to reinforce or reformulate the principles discussed above, describe the problems I have encountered in reporting the impact my qualitative research activities have had on me, how they have influenced my personal and academic life, what continuity I have given to my relations with the informants after finishing the research projects, and approaching these and other issues from the point of view of the testimony of colleagues and students. It therefore remains to launch a new process of dialog to know the voices of the authors, their thoughts on the discrepancies expressed above, and if they agree with them, the paths to be followed to overcome them. I hope you, my interlocutors, will contribute to making that dialog fruitful. [65]

## References

- Banister, P.; Burman, E.; Parker, I.; Taylor, M. & Tindall, C. (1994). *Qualitative methods in psychology. A research guide*. Philadelphia: Open University.
- Bazerman, C. (1988). *Shaping written knowledge: The genre and activity of the experimental article in science*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Billig, M (1994). Repopulating the depopulated pages of social psychology. *Theory and Psychology*, 4(3), 307-335.
- Brinton Lykes, M. (1997). Activist participatory research among the Maya of Guatemala: Constructing meanings from situated knowledge. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53(4), 725-746.
- Brown, L.M. (1997). Performing Feminities: Listening to White working Class Girls in Rural Maine. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53(4), 683-701.
- Brydon Miller, M. (1997). Participatory action research: Psychology and social change. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53(4), 657-666.
- Burman, E. (1997a). Minding the gap: Positivism, Psychology and the Politics of Qualitative Methods. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53(4), 785-802.
- Burman, E. (1997b). Differentiating and de-developing critical social psychology. In T. Ibañez & L. Iñiguez (Eds.), *Critical social psychology* (pp. 229-240). London: Sage.
- Chataway, C. (1997). An examination of the constraints of mutual inquiry in a Participatory action research project. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53(4), 747-766.
- [Denzin, N.](#) (1996). The facts and fictions of qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2(2), 230-241.
- Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Eisner, E. (1997). The new frontier in qualitative research methodology. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(3), 259-273.
- Finley, S. & Knowles, G. (1995). Researcher as Artist. Artist as Researcher. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1(1), 110-142.
- Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and punishment: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage.
- Gergen, K. (1990). Textual considerations in the scientific construction of human character. *Style*, 24, 365-379.
- Gergen, K. (1996). *Realidades y Relaciones*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Gergen, K. (1997). *From self to relationships: Theory and Practice*. Invited Address, XXVI Interamerican Congress of Psychology, Brazil, July 6-11, 1997.
- Heron, J. & Reason, P. (1997). A participatory inquiry paradigm. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(3), 274-294.
- Ibañez, T. (1994). Construcciónismo y Psicología. *Revista Interamericana de Psicología*, 28(1), 105-123.
- Ibañez, T & Iñiguez, L. (Eds.). *Critical social psychology*. London: Sage.
- Kendall, G. & Michael, M. (1997). Politicizing the politics of postmodern social psychology. *Theory and Psychology*, 7(2), 7-29.
- Leudar, I. & Antaki, C. (1996). Discourse, participation, reported speech and research practices in social psychology. *Theory and Psychology*, 6(1), 5-30.
- Lincoln, Y. (1997). The sixth and seventh movement in qualitative research. *Collaborative Inquiry*, 20, pp.11-23.
- Manning, K. (1997). Authenticity in constructivist inquiry ? Methodological considerations without prescriptions. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(1), 93-115.
- Marecek, J.; Fine, M. & Kidder, L. (1997). Working between worlds: qualitative methods and social psychology. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53(4), 631-644.
- Martin-Baró, I. (1985). *Acción e ideología. psicología social desde Centroamérica* (2nd Edition) San Salvador: Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas.
- Miller, J. & B. Glassner (1997/1998). The "Inside" and the "Outside": Finding realities in interviews. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: theory, method and practice* (pp.99-112). London: Sage.

- Moreno, A. (1993). *El aro y la trama. Episteme, modernidad y pueblo*. Caracas: Centro de Investigaciones Populares, Universidad de Carabobo.
- Moreno, A.; Brandt, J.C.; Campos, A.; Navarro, R.; Pérez, M.; Rodríguez, W. & Varela, Y. (1998). *Historia de vida de Felicia Valera*. Caracas: Fondo Editorial CONICIT.
- Morgan, M. (1996). Reading the rhetoric of crisis. *Theory and Psychology*, 6(2), 267-286.
- Morse, J.M. (Ed.) (1994). *Critical issues in qualitative research methods*. London: Sage
- Parker, I. (1997). The unconscious state of social psychology. In T. Ibañez y L. Iñiguez (Eds.), *Critical social psychology* (pp. 157-169). London: Sage.
- Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (1995). Discourse Analysis. In J.A. Smith, R. Harré & L. van Langenhove (Eds.), *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* (pp.80-92). London: Sage.
- Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (1997). Social representations, discourse analysis and racism. In S. Moscovici & U. Flick (Eds.), *The psychology of the social* (pp.138-155). Berlin: Rowohlt.
- Prilleltensky, I. (1994). *The Morals and Politics of Psychology: Discourse and the Status Quo*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Reason, P. (1994). 'Co-operative inquiry, participatory action research and action inquiry: three approaches to participative inquiry'. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp.324-339). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Richardson, L. (1995). Writing stories? Co-authoring "The sea monster", a writing story. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1(2), 189-203
- Sampson, E. (1991). The democratization of psychology. *Theory and Psychology*, 1(2), 275-298.
- Sampson, E. (1993). *Celebrating the other: A dialogic account of human nature*. New York: Harvester wheatshef.
- Sarbin, T. (1986). *Narrative psychology. The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*. New York: Praeger.
- Scott, B. & Katz, B. (1995). Constructing psychological knowledge. Reflections on science, scientists and epistemology in the APA Publication Manual. *Theory and Psychology*, 5(2), 217-232.
- Shotter, J. (1993). *Conversational realities*. London: Sage.
- Shotter, J. & Gergen, K.J. (Eds.) (1989). *Texts of Identity*. London: Sage.
- Spears, R. (1997). Introduction. In T. Ibañez & L. Iñiguez (Eds.), *Critical social psychology* (pp.1-26). London: Sage.
- Thomas, T. (1998). Prolegomenon to a Contemporary Psychology of Liberation. *Theory and Psychology*, 8(4), 527-547.
- Tolman, D. & Brydon-Miller, M.(1997). Transforming Psychology: Interpretive and Participatory Research Methods. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53(4), 597-604.
- Ulichny, P. (1997). When Critical Ethnography and Action Collide. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(2), 139-169.
- Walsh Bowers, R. (1995). The reporting and ethics of the research relationship in areas of interpersonal psychology, 1939-1989. *Theory and Psychology*, 5(2), 233-250.
- Wexler, P. (Ed.) (1991). *Critical Theory Now*. London: Palmer.
- Wiesenfeld, E. (1997). *La Construcción del Conocimiento en la Psicología Social Comunitaria: ¿ Qué, Quién, Cómo ?* Invited address, Ist. Latin American Seminar on Community and Health Psychology, Brazil, Brasilia, 14-17 July, 1997.

## Author

*Esther WIESENFELD*

Contact:

Esther Wiesenfeld

Institute of Psychology  
Central University of Venezuela  
Apartado 47018  
Caracas 1041-A  
Venezuela

Fax: (582) 662-396

E-mail: [ewiesen@reacciun.ve](mailto:ewiesen@reacciun.ve)

## Citation

Wiesenfeld, Esther (2000). Between Prescription and Action: The Gap between the Theory and Practice of Qualitative Inquiries [65 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(2), Art. 30, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0002303>.