

Review:

Mary Gergen

**Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds.) (2002). *The Qualitative Inquiry Reader*.** Thousand Oaks, CA, London: Sage, 399 pages, ISBN 0-7619-2491-4(Cloth), \$75.95, ISBN 0-7619-2492-2 (paper), \$39.95

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**Abstract:** This "cutting edge" reader is composed of 20 selections taken from *Qualitative Inquiry* in the past seven years. Its emphasis is on displaying new forms of qualitative inquiry, including ethnographies, performances and poetics, with the aim of presenting new methods and critical frameworks for interpreting this work, as well as developing a reflexive sensitivity to the critical and ethical dimensions of research.

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## 1. Introducing the *Reader* to the Reader: A Joyful Opportunity

The one journal that I receive with a joyous heart each month is *Qualitative Inquiry*. Within it are pieces that defy the conventional forms, topics and perspectives of the traditional journal in the social sciences. A typical *Qualitative Inquiry* may include poems, short stories, critical commentaries and photographs, as well as straighter textual forms, all designed to present some mode of doing or reflecting on social science work. Often there are interesting "takes" on topical issues, from multicultural concerns to personal dilemmas of the heart. According to editors Norman DENZIN and Yvonna LINCOLN, *Qualitative Inquiry* is "a civic, participatory, collaborative project, a project that joins the researcher with the researched in an on-going moral dialogue" (pg.ix). The edited volume I review here includes 20 pieces taken from the journal between 1995-2000, plus an introduction to the entire *Reader*, introductions to the various sections, and an afterward by DENZIN and LINCOLN. [1]

## 2. Devising Divides: Reflexive and Auto-ethnography, Poetics, Performance and Perspectives

The *Reader* is divided into five sections: Reflexive Ethnography, Autoethnography, Poetics, Performance Narratives and Assessing the Text. The first four are related in their presentations of qualitative inquiries and the last section is centered on an effort to evaluate the work. The question of what is good qualitative inquiry, given the absence of a God's eye view, is at the heart of the five sections. In *Reflexive Ethnography* the importance of writing, itself, is the

central concern. Writers indicate their awareness of their modes of constructing reality within their forms. The four entries by Deborah CEGLOWSKI, Christopher DUNBAR, Jr., Laurel RICHARDSON, and Elizabeth ADAMS ST. PIERRE reflect their research practices as well. As one example, ST. PIERRE's "Circling the Text: Nomadic Writing Practices" invokes DELEUZE and GUATTARI's figurations of the rhizome, the fold, the nomad and haecceity to rewrite/re-right the subjectivities of a group of older women in her hometown in the American South. ST. PIERRE discovers through her fieldwork activities, her experience of writing and her exposure to these new metaphors that she has only begun her quest to know these women. She is being lead back into the field, to share her writings with these women and to write about this experience as well. She has promised them all a book, although their mortality threatens her vow. Their amazing stories vex her capacities to enfold them between the covers of a book. Despite the disarray, she is eager to pursue this daunting and compelling task. [2]

In *Autoethnography*, not only is the attention on reflexive writing, but also the topic evolves from personal experiences—youth, parenthood, marginalized existences and ethnic identity. The four authors of these texts are Elena Tajima CREEF, Jean HALLEY, Richard V. TRAVISANO, and Carol Rambo RONAI. Perhaps the most startling piece, "The Next Night *Sous Rature*: Wrestling with DERRIDA's Mimesis," by RONAI, presents descriptions of the author's experiences as a striptease dancer and lady wrestler at a "gentleman's club." Using identity as a theme, she suggests that erasure is a threat at all times, given the loss of the metaphor of correspondence between reality and word, as well as the loss of a sense of stable identity for herself. She writes, "Ultimately, lived experience, identity, and writing can be seen as simultaneous processes of destruction and creation." (p.105) [3]

The section on *Poetics* extends the literary freedoms of the authors who continue to write from their own experiences. Here, a primary pursuit is the emotional responsive potential of the reader. Using poetic forms, four writers present themes of exploration, social science critique, anthropological inquiry and personal development. Ivan BRADY, Mark NOWAK, and MILES RICHARDSON join Mary E. WEEMS in their poetic endeavors. In "Windows," Mary E. WEEMS writes that her improvisational poetry is a response to her position as an African-American woman-mama-artist-educator-activist struggling for social justice in an oppressive, racist and sexist country. In this compilation she arranges glimpses of her reactions to things—seeing art, reading a poem and asking a question. She calls herself "Black woman egghead, "smooth obsidian cracked, smacked and bushwhacked" (p.170). Her poetry is a variation on the "blues"—the dynamics equivalent to musicians "riffing" when they get together to play. [4]

Part Four describes how *Performance Narratives* rely on story forms for their realization, yet diverge from the traditional story forms in their resistances. The boundary between these forms and other forms of theatrical performance becomes fuzzy; there is a liminal space into which the performance is cast. One piece by Stacy Holman JONES is an extract from her study of Torch singers, including Edith PIAF and Billie HOLIDAY. The other selection is by Ronald J.

PELIAS, who argues that theater is a rehearsal for death. His essay oscillates between a FREUDian and LACANian perspective on the idea of Presence (and by its Other, Absence). While an intellectual *tour de force*, the essay is meant to be read aloud so that the language itself is a sonorous focus of attention. In his concluding paragraph he suggests that watching theater teaches us "how to mourn what is no longer present," (p227) although we resist this knowledge as things come and go, until everything is gone. [5]

Critique is the mode for Part Five: *Assessing the Text*. Here topics such as validity, standards of worth, dilemmas of doing fieldwork and expertise are explored with a critic's eye. The six chapters conform most closely to traditional standards of writing, but are vivid in their challenges to contemporary social science practices. Validity concerns are emphasized in pieces by Linda Liska BELGRAVE and Kenneth J. SMITH, Arthur P. BOCHNER, Steinar KVALE, and Yvonna S. LINCOLN. Michelle FINE and Lois WEIS investigate ethical issues of doing research in urban settings. Also included in this section is the work of Monica Russel y RODRIQUEZ. In "Confronting Anthropology's Silencing Praxis: Speaking of/from a Chicana Consciousness," she argues that both normative and oppositional stances of current anthropological practices have a silencing effect on the knowledge of the Native. As both an anthropologist and a Chicana, she experiences two silencings, one of her own voice, and another of her group's voice. The first silencing comes from being observed as a Native by other anthropologists; the second, from being made a hyperprivileged minority intellectual who speaks and stands for all who are in her group. As she argues, "Taking on the role of the Tamed Native ... upholds rather than changes ideas of diversity." (p.355) [6]

Yvonne LINCOLN, volume co-editor, assumes the difficult task of suggesting how these diverse and creative projects can be understood and evaluated. At present, she describes these efforts as ongoing dialogues about emerging criteria. Her article compares the more traditional "Scientific" paradigm with the "Constructivist/naturalistic" (interpretive) paradigm. She points out that the latter cannot be judged by the standards of the former, and that the recent spate of criteria by which the latter paradigm might be judged share the quality of being "relational." Interpretive anthropology also is evaluated by the criteria of "positionality"—the recognition that all texts are incomplete and partial, and that they are located within culturally-bounded, historical circumstances, with a specific author. A third criteria LINCOLN emphasizes is community, that is the relationship of the writers to the people to whom the text is addressed. Of course, there could be multiple interpretations of who is within that community as well as how diverse her/his standards might be. Other criteria she mentions are "voice"—who is speaking; "critical subjectivity," that is, the reflexivity of the writer; "reciprocity", or the relational connections between researcher and researched; "sacredness" or the profound concern with others that the researcher relationship with the research expresses and the extent to which there is a sharing of the "perquisites of privilege." [7]

### 3. Final Words: Generating Creative Research across Diverse Disciplines

This *Reader* is a gem. It is very helpful in displaying the possibilities of interpretive research work—qualitative research, ethnographic fieldwork and other alternative social science activity—all of which has resulted from the narrative turn. It illustrates the blurred lines between the humanities and the social sciences and gives those in a host of disciplines permission to push the boundaries further. There is ample exposure here to the voices within *Qualitative Inquiry* who call out for experimentation and creativity as well as for those who worry about standards and quality work. The introductory material offers guidance in how to consider these new forms of writing and the scientific impulses that preceded the research. There is much within these pages to stimulate new research agendas, new interdisciplinary conversations and new modes of writing. It also serves as a rich source for challenging more traditional pursuits. Scholars at all levels in anthropology, communication, cultural studies, educational research, family studies, gerontology, health, medicine, nursing, psychology, social work and sociology would be encouraged to discover *Qualitative Inquiry*, and this *Reader* as a beginning. [8]

#### Author

[Mary GERGEN](#) is Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies at Penn State University Delaware County in Media, PA, USA. Her academic interests are often found at the intersection of feminist and social constructionist theories. Her most recent book is *Feminist Reconstructions in Psychology: Narrative, Gender, and Performance* (2001, Sage). She is also the editor of *Toward a New Feminist Psychology: A Reader*, with Sara N. DAVIS (1999, Routledge), and is co-editor with [Kenneth J. GERGEN](#) of *Social Constructionism: A Reader* (2003, Sage). She is co-founder of the Taos Institute, a non-profit organization dedicated to the expansion of social constructionist ideas in various professional practices, including therapy and organizational development.

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