Qualitative Methods and Health Policy Research

Elizabeth Murphy

Robert Dingwall

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Introduction

How can we possibly justify writing yet another book about qualitative research in health care? Are there not more than enough to satisfy the most discriminating researcher or methodology teacher? That may well be true but we think that there is a different kind of reader who needs a different kind of book. This is not another "how to do it" guide. We are writing for commissioners and consumers of health care research, those who have to plan, make policy, manage, and deliver services to, and for, sick people. Many of them have become increasingly aware that research based on qualitative methods could give them information that would not otherwise be available. This information would help them toward their goal of providing health care ever more efficiently, effectively, fairly, and compassionately. But these consumers are also confused by the apparent absence of the quality standards with which they are familiar from quantitative research. How can they decide whether the information offered to them is representative, valid, and reliable? What can they do with an approach that seems to be long on theory and short on facts?

The consumers' confusion is not helped by the disagreements between qualitative researchers themselves. Some qualitative researchers regard their work as a branch of the creative arts rather than as a form of policy science. This book does not oppose the liberal case for supporting scholarship in the humanities. However, it does question the claim of those who reject the model of policy science to be granted the privileges that go with it. In this respect, at least, it is also a book that we hope our peers will read as a manifesto for what in the United Kingdom we have come, under the influence of Martyn Hammersley (1992a), to call "subtle realism" and which U.S. scholars are beginning to defend as 'realist ethnography' (see Flaherty et al. 2002).

We shall explain what we mean by these terms as the book develops. Qualitative work does not have a *right* to any particular share of the research

dollar any more than it has a *right* to command the attention of consumers. It is the social scientist's responsibility to communicate clearly, not the reader's to struggle constantly with obscure or pretentious writing. If we can accomplish this, then we believe that the case for supporting qualitative work, and for discriminating between good and bad examples of it, will be compelling.

What is our status for writing this book? Between us we have over thirty years' experience of doing policy-oriented qualitative research in health care. We have walked the streets of major cities with public health nurses visiting mothers with young children. We have observed interdisciplinary teams discussing interventions in child abuse and neglect. We have sat in busy emergency rooms and watched family practitioners in their offices. We have talked to diabetics about why they do not take their medication or follow advice about changing their lifestyles. We have studied the delivery of care to people with back pain and the delivery of lifestyle advice to smokers. We have interviewed mothers and health professionals about child care practices. Our graduate students have looked at topics as diverse as organizational reforms in hospitals and primary care, the practice of surgery and anesthesia, and relations between minority women and obstetric care providers. In the course of our careers, we have used all the major technologies of qualitative research: observation, interviews, interaction analysis of audio or video recordings of clinical practice, and the analysis of images and documents. The direct inspiration for this book came from a commission from the UK National Health Service Health Technology Assessment Programme to write a report on the possible relevance of qualitative methods for their work. In the language of the moment, this book is a reimagining of that report (Murphy et al. 1998). Freed from the constraints of commissioned impartiality, we can set out our case for realist qualitative research as a branch of policy science and illustrate this through a review of major U.S. qualitative contributions to the social scientific study of health care.

We identify three kinds of research consumer in this book. Most of it is directed at those potential users who are agnostic, in the best sense of that word. They have not yet decided whether qualitative research has anything specific to offer them but are curious to know more about it and open to the possibility that they might find something useful in the course of this search. Those readers may prefer to go directly to Chapter 3. Before we get to the positive case, however, we have written two chapters for the other types of consumer. One of these is the sort of person who rejects any knowledge that does not come in quantitative form, believing this to be the only guarantee of the truth, objectivity, and disinterestedness of that information. The other is the sort who often claims to have some existing familiarity with qualitative research and is enthusiastic about it precisely because

they believe that it introduces an element of humanity, subjectivity, and moral or political critique that is excluded by quantitative research. We think that both of these views are wrong and explain why.

We then take a more practical turn as we review each of the main qualitative research technologies. This book does not tell readers how to use these as researchers: rather, it explains what information each can generate, how that information can be evaluated, and how it can then feed into the improvement of health care planning, organization, or delivery.

Finally, we return to some more general statements. How can consumers recognize quality? How can they discriminate between good and bad examples of qualitative research? Where does qualitative research fit in the essential portfolio of evidence-based practice, management, or policy?

The earlier report, that forms the foundation of this book, was prepared in collaboration with David Greatbatch, Susan Parker, and Pamela Watson, and we would like to thank all of them for their contributions. The approach to social research outlined within it is the product of many years' reading and conversation with a large number of friends and colleagues. They include, but are not restricted to, David Altheide, J. Maxwell Atkinson, Paul Atkinson, David Armstrong, Howard Becker, Michael Bloor, Charles Bosk, Robert Emerson, Eliot Freidson, Harold Garfinkel, Jay Gubrium, Martyn Ham-mersley, John Heritage, Jim Holstein, the late Gordon Horobin, David Hughes, Veronica James, John M. Johnson, Peter Manning, Douglas Maynard, Gale Miller, Anne Murcott, Roger Murphy, Virginia Olesen, Susan Silbey, David Silverman, Gilbert Smith, the late Anselm Strauss, and the late Philip M. Strong. None of them, of course, are to blame for what follows. We should also like to acknowledge the specific comments of Martyn Hammersley and Alison Pilnick on sections of the present manuscript and the hospitality of the American Bar Foundation, where the copyedited text was ultimately prepared for the printer. Finally, we would like to commend Richard Koffler's patience with the delays imposed by career contingencies unforeseen when he first issued us with a contract and thank Mike Sola for his judicious copyediting.

I

The Contribution of Qualitative Research

1

Qualitative Research and Policy Science

What are your motives for reading this book? Are you a skeptic who believes that the only valid and reliable knowledge is that which comes in quantitative forms, and who wants to know why there is so much fuss about qualitative methods? Are you already a convert who believes that qualitative research is a way to bring romance back into a world that has been dulled by number crunching? Or are you an agnostic, who just wants to know whether there might be anything in this stuff that could be useful to you, your organization, and your patients? This chapter and the next are directed primarily at the first two readers. For the skeptic, they explain that qualitative research can be done in ways that are precise, rigorous, and scientific. For the romantic, they explain why many qualitative researchers have been reasserting the virtues of precision, rigor, and science against the recent fashion for subjectivity, empathy, and emotional politics. In the process, however, the agnostic will learn how we come to adopt the subtle realist foundations that underpin the remainder of this book.

Skeptical consumers frequently describe qualitative research with words like "soft," "impressionistic," "ideological," and "anecdotal." In context, these usually amount to a charge that the work is not scientific, as the skeptic understands that word. If qualitative research is not science, then it cannot contribute to a sound evidence base in health care policy and practice. Given this, it has nothing to offer to busy men and women concerned with the important practical issues of health service design, organization, and delivery. We disagree. We think that qualitative research can be done in a scientific fashion with rigor and precision. The means by which these are achieved may be unfamiliar to the skeptic but the objectives are identical.

As we set out a subtle realist program, however, we are conscious that this contradicts many features of some contemporary qualitative research

that attract romantic consumers. They think this approach provides an element of color and humanity that has been eliminated by what they regard as the straitjacket of quantitative research. In their vocabulary, quantitative methods are "scientistic," "positivistic," "malestream," "artificial," "crushing of meaning," and so on. Their enthusiasm is fueled by sections of the qualitative research community. For example, the editors of the influential *Handbook of Qualitative Research* claim, in the latest edition, that the history of qualitative research in North America can be divided into seven phases or "moments." The current, sixth, moment is one in which "fictional ethnographies, ethnographic poetry, and multimedia texts are today taken for granted" (Denzin & Lincoln 2000:17). The barriers between scientific and other forms of writing, including journalism, fiction, and poetry, are being broken down (Ellis & Bochner 1996). Researchers are openly committed to "ideological research" that will contribute to the overthrow of patriarchy, neocolonialism, or global capitalism (Lather 1986). Qualitative research is to be understood as a "moral, allegorical, and therapeutic project" within which "the researcher's story is written as a prop, a pillar that … will help men and women endure and prevail in the dawning years of the 21st century" (Denzin & Lincoln 2000:xvi). These approaches are claimed to be as acceptable as more traditional ones: "There can be no question that the legitimacy of postmodern paradigms is well established and at least equal to the legitimacy of received and conventional paradigms" (Lincoln & Guba 2000:164).

In the context of this romantic turn, the skeptics' reaction to qualitative research is understandable, and we share a great deal of it. However, it makes our task more difficult, in that we must explain both why we think that qualitative research can offer useful knowledge for policy and practice and why we do not think that the search for alternative standards from the humanities is helpful. In the words of one early critic of this turn, we think that it is more important to be "right" than to be "right-on" (Strong 1988). This chapter looks at three issues where the pressure from romantics gives skeptics most cause for concern:

- Is qualitative research science?
- Can qualitative research reports be distinguished from journalism or fiction?
- Is qualitative research driven by a political agenda rather than by a quest for useful knowledge?

We shall show that realist qualitative researchers need not abandon a commitment to science or the search for authoritative knowledge. We do not believe that the dissolution of the boundaries between scientific and other kinds of writing is helpful. Finally, we believe that seeing research as

primarily a political project confuses the roles of knowledge producer and activist in ways that are unhelpful and that undermine research's potential contribution to practical social change.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AS SCIENCE

Qualitative researchers have traditionally been cautious about claiming that their work was scientific. The "right-on" schools have exaggerated this caution into an outright rejection of science as a model for their work. Science is, for them, outmoded, "an archaic form of consciousness surviving for a while yet in a degraded form" (Tyler 1986:200). Scientists' assertions that they are in pursuit of truth simply camouflage their own lust for power. There is no essential difference between truth and propaganda. "Truth games" are represented as a form of terrorism (Rosenau 1992). The result is sometimes described as a *crisis of legitimation*, that there is no form of knowledge that is not arbitrary, subjective, and biased by interests (Lincoln & Guba 2000).

The boundary between science and propaganda has often been breached (Fay 1996) and some distrust of scientific claims may certainly be healthy (Sanders 1995). However, just because we can find examples of propaganda masquerading as science and of science being exploited as propaganda, it does not follow that propaganda and science are synonymous. Similarly, we can question the claim that science creates disinterested and objective knowledge of an observer-independent world without concluding that science is impossible.

The skeptics' reservations about qualitative research are usually based on the deep-rooted assumption among natural scientists, and some social scientists, that there is a world "out there," prior to, and independent of, their observations. This world can be known objectively in the sense that all observers will, if identically placed, see it in exactly the same way. If a suitable language were available, they would also all produce identical descriptions. From these observations they can work out the laws governing the world's operations. Truth is simply a matter of correct description. Particular observations and statements of laws might contain errors but these will be corrected by further data or better observational techniques. Neither observations nor laws have any moral or ethical implication: they simply describe what is. The consumer of science is, ideally, presented with a structured set of facts and the laws that describe the relationship between these facts. If A is necessary for B and C to happen, then preventing A from happening will eliminate B and C.

If we take medicine as an example, this model would lead to the view that human diseases have always and everywhere been the same, at least

once established in the species. If they have been described and classified in different ways by different cultures or at different historical periods, this is because there has been insufficient systematic data to establish their true nature. As this is collected, universally valid descriptions will be produced. In principle, then, any doctor seeing a patient with a particular disease will, if not today then at some foreseeable point in the future, see the same disease and describe it in the same terms. From being a "catchall" term for uncontrolled cellular growths, for instance, many specialists now talk of "cancer" as the aggregate of possibly several hundred different diseases, whose individual characters are gradually being captured and defined. We may look back in a hundred years' time, as we now look back to the nineteenth-century disease of chlorosis, to a disease category that was once widely used and is now extinct (Figlio 1978). However, this is a sign of progress, of a closer approximation to the truth of disease replacing our current errors. Whatever names we give to these new disease categories, they have always been there: it is simply that we can now see them properly.

Although this approach has resulted in many valuable contributions to the welfare of humankind, it has never gone unquestioned. Ever since philosophers began debating the nature of science more than two thousand years ago, there has been a competing view that the world "out there" is shaped and organized, if not actually created, by the perceptions of the observer. In consequence, claims to know that world objectively must be treated with caution. Knowledge always rests on some point of view—on some mixture of the observer's prior knowledge, experience, values, and motives with their biological and technological capacities. All facts are *artifacts*, products of the processes by which we decide what might be important to notice and record and of the concepts that frame those processes. In Fay's words, "Descriptions always take place *within* a framework which provides the conceptual resources in and through which reality (or events and objects in it) is described" (1996:74). This framework is not, however, purely subjective. At the most basic level, one of the ways in which we constantly affirm our sanity is by seeing the world in the way expected of ordinary members of the social groups to which we belong (Goffman 1983). If we see a fuzzy road sign, we *know* that our vision is at fault rather than the sign (Pollner 1975). As scholars, we usually show our competence by demonstrating that we see the world in the way that people with our particular training and status would be expected to.

Natural scientists, then, have to learn a specific way of seeing the world in order to be accepted as competent in their field. This is enforced by the social processes of recruitment, organization, and control within the scientific community. If disease categories, such as "cancer," vary over time, this does not show a progressive approximation to the essential truth of nature

but the consequences of changes within the scientific community. Different generations use different investigative technologies and different classificatory criteria, associated with different therapies and different goals. The underlying biological structures and processes are seen through different frames, giving them a different appearance. The change from one frame to another over time is rarely a matter of truth correcting error but rather of changing ideas about what would count as truth and error. There might, indeed, be a real world out there somewhere: we can, however, only know it through a process that is subject to both social and psychological influences. The results can amalgamate statements of fact and statements of value. When we say that "X is a disease," for example, we are not just describing X but also communicating a value judgment about X, that it is undesirable (Dingwall 2001). Conversely, a negative evaluation of X might lead to its, apparently factual, classification as a disease. Think, for example, of the long-running debate within the American Psychiatric Association about whether or not homosexuality should be defined as a disease that the profession should seek to "cure" (Bayer 1987).

Some qualitative researchers have gone on from this to conclude that they should give up any claim to be doing science and adopt some form of relativism (Ellis & Flaherty 1992; Lather 1993). Relativists assert that we decide what counts as "real" *only* through the linguistic and cultural resources of the groups to which we belong, which frame our interaction with the world (Fay 1996). Consequently, it is possible for many different realities to exist or even for there to be as many realities as there are persons (Smith 1984:386). Individual realities may contradict one another and yet still be equally true for those operating within them. We cannot test such realities against "objective facts" since "facts" are themselves produced by reference to conceptual frameworks. In a discussion of witchcraft and psychotherapy, Fay (1996) illustrates the difficulties that result. Relativists cannot distinguish between psychotherapy and witchcraft as means of dealing with strange behavior. The prior decision, whether to believe in witchcraft or in psychotherapy, shapes the very perception of what behavior will be counted as strange and how it can properly be explained. Claims about the world are only true, if the idea of truth has any meaning at all, within the frameworks adopted by those who make the claims. In that sense, all claims to truth are arbitrary.

The relativist position denies that there is any independent basis on which we can choose between different conceptual frameworks or the realities they produce. There is no possibility of a "God's eye point of view" (Smith 1985). Standards of judgment are internal to particular conceptual schemes, so they cannot be applied across them. There is no way to evaluate the adequacy of one explanation or description against another. Relativists turn, instead, to moral, ethical, or political criteria. Truth

claims rest on moral superiority or political expediency, on being "right-on" rather than being "right." Research illustrates or justifies a prior position, which is itself placed beyond question. For romantic consumers of qualitative research, this is part of its attraction, that it can sustain what they already believe.

For skeptical consumers, however, such relativism further undermines the usefulness of qualitative research for practice (Greene 1996; Sanders 1995). If researchers' only possible output is one more story, one more reality among an indefinite number of possible realities, what good are they? Why should they expect financial support in competition with novelists, poets, or artists (Strong 1983)? The public funding of research and scholarship rests on an implicit contract to produce knowledge that is in some sense relevant to the goals and values of a society (Hammersley 1995). Relativism undermines the foundations of that contract.

The relativists' conclusion can be criticized in a number of ways. First, it is self-refuting. If the claim that all truths are relative is true, then this claim itself must be relative. The claim can only be true in terms of a particular set of assumptions that others may judge to be false. Second, it certainly underestimates the extent to which reality has a way of resisting our constructions. The world we observe has the crucial ability to "talk back" (Dawson & Prus 1995). While it may be true that any observation is irreducibly an interpretation of the world, it is not true that the world will bear any interpretation we care to put upon it. Garfinkel (2002:173–5) has recently characterized this as "natural accountability," the challenge to produce descriptions that are above all disciplined by the local particulars of the "shop floor," the material and cognitive environment in which real things happen. "The obdurate character of the empirical world" (Blumer 1969:22) can challenge our conceptual frameworks. Would you want to fly straight and level at five thousand feet from Denver to San Francisco with a pilot who thought the Rockies were a social construct? Even a postmodernist cannot play football with a broken leg. Third, it creates an implausible model of social organization. It leads to the claim that different people inhabit different and incommensurable worlds with no possibility of meaningful communication between them. If this were correct, human social interaction would be literally impossible, since there would be no common reference points.

Relativism is not the only possible response to the loose coupling between the world and our understanding of it. An alternative, which we argue is more appropriate for policy science, is what Hammersley (1992a) has called "subtle realism." This acknowledges that researchers are constrained by the prior frames that they bring to their observations (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). The observer's knowledge is, however, always "a *joint* product of the referent and the cultural-biological lenses

through which it [the phenomenon under study] is seen" (Campbell 1994:157, emphasis added). The subtle realist accepts that a world exists independently of its observers and constrains the observations that can be made. At the same time those observations are also constrained by the "cultural-biological lens" through which they are made.

Subtle realists accept that everything can be represented from a range of different perspectives, through different "cultural-biological lenses." Several representations may coexist and be potentially true. Unlike the relativist, however, the subtle realist does not assume that all these representations are equally valid. Judgments can be made about their truth or falsity. We may never know with absolute certainty that a particular knowledge claim is true (Hammersley 1993). Nevertheless, claims can be rigorously tested and evaluated. We can make a judgment about whether they are adequately supported by evidence and argument. Dewey referred to this as "warranted assertability" (1938:7), while Phillips talks about "truth as a regulative ideal" (1987:23).

Science, in this view, is a *procedural* commitment. In practice, it consists of openness to refutation, a conscientious and systematic search for contradictory evidence, and a readiness to subject one's preconceptions to critical examination. The devotion to truth as a regulative ideal is an essential difference between science and propaganda. Through its natural accountability, science is always capable of being changed by inconvenient data. Propaganda merely seeks to ignore, incorporate or explain away contradictory evidence. As such, objectivity is above all an attitude or "a state of mind," which can characterize any kind of research. Qualitative research regulated by an ideal of truth should be capable of satisfying skeptical consumers that it meets their basic tests of science, even if the specific means adopted are unfamiliar. The next chapter will describe some of the general characteristics of the procedural commitments that we advocate for qualitative research.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND FORMS OF WRITING

Skeptical consumers frequently charge qualitative research reports with being indistinguishable from forms of writing like journalism and fiction. Ironically, many contemporary qualitative researchers would take this as praise rather than as criticism. As we have seen, they reject conventional forms of scientific writing as part of their program to break down the boundaries between science and the humanities (Ellis & Bochner 1996; Richardson 1988, 1992). These researchers have turned to alternative forms of writing in an attempt to escape the rhetoric, epistemology, and politics of conventional research reporting. Textual innovations include poetry

(Austin 1996; Richardson 1992; Tillmann-Healy 1996), collage (Clifford 1981), personal narratives (Ronai 1992, 1996; Tillman-Healy 1996; Ellis 1996; Kolker 1996), dramatic presentations and constructed dialogues (Bluebond-Langer 1980; Ellis & Bochner 1992; Mienczakowski & Morgan 1993; Paget 1990), and polyvocal texts (Fox 1996). These experiments respond to what is described as the *crisis of representation*, because it arises from self-conscious questioning of what counts as an adequate representation of reality (Richardson 1988).

The advocates of these alternative writing forms are dissatisfied with conventional research reports on three grounds. The first is aesthetic: conventional reports are accused of being "dreary" (Richardson 1992), "formulaic" (Richardson 1988), or "boring, esoteric and parochial" (Ellis & Bochner 1996). In particular, they focus on the cognitive at the expense of the emotional (Ellis & Bochner 1996). The second is closely linked to the relativist position discussed above. Traditional forms of research report assume that there is an independent and external reality to write about. If that assumption is rejected, then it is not surprising to find the rejection of the rhetorically impersonal and objective forms of writing that reflect it. The third objection is essentially political. Given their insistence that what we take to be reality is constituted through our own interpretive activity, many postmodernists question the right of researchers to impose their interpretations of reality on the people they study. The authors of "scientific" research reports usurp the authority of those people to speak for themselves. Alternative forms of writing are claimed to overcome some or all of these alleged shortcomings. First, such writing will be more accessible and interesting. Second, textual radicalism is a way of breaking down the distinction between observer and observed (Tyler 1986), disrupting and displacing the rhetorical devices that establish the researcher's authority at the expense of those under study (Lather 1991). Finally, certain kinds of experimental writing, particularly the presentation of unedited interview transcripts, without analysis or theorizing, are a means of "giving voice" to those being studied in a way that is otherwise denied to them.

The responsibility for effective communication is not entirely one-sided. Different kinds of writing call for different types of engagement from readers. Whether or not a text is boring or dreary depends, to a certain extent, upon the expectations that are brought by readers. If readers approach scientific research reports with the same expectations as they bring to reading novels or glossy magazines then they are indeed likely to be disappointed. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that some conventional social scientific writing is boring and dreary. However, it is equally the case that some is well-written and compelling. Moreover, the experimental writing, with which critics seek to replace it, is not universally faultless. As Sanders comments, "Postmodernists frequently stumble and produce materials

that read like high-school creative writing exercises or passages from mediocre cyberpunk novels" (1995:95). He argues that much of what is produced in such genres tends to be intensely narcissistic. At worst, it "represents lengthy therapeutic rambling in which the writer insists upon telling us about his or her dreams, personal insecurities, 'meditations,' and sources of 'panic'" (ibid.:96). While such accounts may have a certain voyeuristic fascination, they can become just as dreary as poor reporting in a more conventional style. If we want readers to be interested in what we write, then we must write as interestingly and engagingly as possible. Experimental forms do not guarantee success in this respect any more than do conventional approaches.

The second objection begins from the observation that conventional authors purport to report on the reality of what they have witnessed in a setting or discovered through talking to those who are the object of study. For relativists, however, reality does not exist before its observation. Researchers, therefore, actually produce the reality they appear to be describing through their writing. This productive activity is hidden from the reader by the range of rhetorical devices commonly used in so-called realist texts. As a result, readers are deceived into treating these texts as objective reports rather than as subjective creations.

The authors of such reports, for example, are generally completely absent from the texts they produce. Such "writing out of the author from the text" can be observed in many early anthropological and sociological works (e.g., Malinowski 1922; Evans-Pritchard 1940; Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss 1961). It is achieved through linguistic devices such as the use of the passive voice and a neutral, authoritative tone. These have the effect of creating what Richardson terms "an illusion of objectivity" (1988:203). Richardson describes the consequences of this authorial self-effacement:

> The implied narrator is godlike, an all-knowing voice from afar and above, stripped of all human subjectivity and fallibility. But, in fact, science does have a human narrator, the "camouflaged first person," hiding in the bramble of the passive voice. (ibid.:203)

The impression created is one of "immaculate perception" (Van Maanen 1988), which disguises the author's preconceptions. This is not just one of a number of possible versions: it is *the* version.

The status of conventional reports may also be bolstered by appeals to the experiential authority of the researcher. In effect, the researcher says to the reader, "I was there, so I should know." Seale (1999) shows how the confessional narratives or "tales from the field," which are included in many qualitative research monographs, serve the purpose of asserting the author's privileged claim to *know* the setting under study. Superficially,

these confessional tales often report on the researcher's initial mistakes and failures. They typically present these as part of a learning experience that allows the author to improve their technique and overcome barriers to gaining an insider's understanding of the setting. As such, they reinforce the privileged authority of the researcher's account. Similarly, the inclusion of a great deal of description of the mundane details of the research setting in many qualitative reports emphasizes the researcher's so-called privilege of presence (Dawson & Prus 1995) and underwrites his or her claim to authoritative knowledge.

Strategies like these are said to obscure the socially constructed nature of research reports. This links them to the third objection to conventional reporting forms. Here, the argument is a political one—that the rhetorical strategies employed in scientific reports obscure not just the theoretical but also the ideological nature of researchers' activities. Under the cloak of objectivity, researchers impose their own point of view, silencing the voices of those who are the objects of their study (Clifford 1986; Denzin & Lincoln 1994). Fine describes this as "a colonizing discourse of the Other" (1994:70). Authority to represent the other, and hence to define what will count as reality about the other, is recognized as one of the ways in which power relationships are played out (Kleinman 1993). The colonialist, sexist, and elitist assumptions embedded in much qualitative research reporting are cited as evidence of the way in which such writing is inherently conservative.

It is important to recognize that all research reports are inescapably "artful products" (Atkinson 1990:2), employing a range of rhetorical and textual strategies. They must be approached with critical sensitivity to the devices that are being used both to advance an argument and to persuade the reader of its merits. Scientific reports are not immaculately conceived reproductions of reality (Charmaz 1995). They are, at best, "partial truths" (Clifford 1986). Any account, scientific or otherwise, is necessarily selective in that it highlights certain aspects of reality, as seen from certain perspectives, and ignores or downplays others (Sanders 1995). The selectivity and potential bias of researcher interpretations do raise important political issues.

However, the problems may not be inevitable or the proposed solutions helpful. As subtle realists, we do not start from the denial of an external world that drives the position outlined above. Since we accept that the settings and people we study are real, it is entirely consistent to try to represent them as accurately as possible when we write about them. Our representations will always be partial, and will sometimes be mistaken, but our objective in writing can be to present as full and faithful a picture as we possibly can. This is what is meant by treating truth as a regulative ideal. Where the goal of postmodernist writing may be evocation, ours continues to be the accurate representation of the phenomena we study.

Treating truth as a regulative ideal has profound implications for the ways in which we write about our research findings. We must present our findings and arguments, and the evidence we call upon to support them, as clearly and precisely as possible. Clarity opens up the possibilities of challenge and refutation that are central to science. As Hammersley (1995:95) argues, the preeminent requirement of any scientific report is that it should lay itself open to rational assessment of the validity of its knowledge claims. We should certainly examine the appropriateness of the interpretations that researchers make of the data they collect, asking to what extent alternative interpretations have been sought and evaluated (Dawson & Prus 1995). Unlike those who argue that the function of qualitative research is to give voice to the oppressed, we believe that our commitment should be to ensuring that, as far as possible, voices at all levels of the organizations and settings we study are incorporated into our analyses. We shall discuss precisely how these objectives might be accomplished in Chapters 7 and 9. Anything that obscures the line of argument, or confuses the evidence upon which that argument is based, should be resisted. This applies equally to "realist tales," which hide from view the author's role in generating and interpreting data, and to radical textual strategies, whose authors deliberately reject both faithful representation and rational argument. Art and literature both play an important role in society. They may evoke aspects of human experience that are resistant to scientific investigation. Such evocations may have enormous potential for stimulating desirable change but they should not be confused with science.

THE POLITICAL AGENDA OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

A final common criticism that is frequently leveled at qualitative research by skeptics relates to its supposedly political nature. Once again, there is some basis for this. Just as many qualitative researchers have tried to move closer to the humanities, so many (often the same ones) have tried to erode the boundaries between research and politics. Their avowed goal is to promote emancipation from sources of domination and repression rather than to produce knowledge (Anderson 1989; Gitlin, Siegel, & Boru 1989; Harding 1987). The intended beneficiaries of such emancipation include women, ethnic or racial minorities, gay men and women, and the working class. For example, Richardson (1988) defines her research task as one that is primarily political. Her responsibility is to "help construct a consciousness of kind in the minds of the protagonists, a concrete recognition of sociological bondedness with others, because such consciousness can break down isolation between people, empower them, and lead to collective action on their behalf" (ibid.:201). The inability of traditional