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MARTYN HAMMERSLEY, *Questioning Qualitative Inquiry*. London: Sage, 2008. 209 pp. (including index). ISBN 9781412935142 (hbk) £75.00; ISBN 9781412935159 (pbk) £24.99

Unsettling is not often a word found in review articles, but unsettled is precisely how Hammersley's *Questioning Qualitative Inquiry* leaves the novice researcher – and with purpose. From the outset, qualitative research is portrayed as a field in crisis. In response, Hammersley defines two, interwoven challenges. The first is to question current practice, debates and our own theoretical beliefs about qualitative research in order to defend our work in light of calls for a more functional research programme. The second (and more crucial to the future of qualitative research) is to encourage a sober assessment and active engagement with the complex ontological and epistemological questions at the heart of qualitative research. The book takes the role of devil's advocate, in order to strengthen our own understanding and means of addressing fundamental difficulties that have direct implications for our research.

Its structure befits the task. The first half of the book examines how well qualitative research has performed according to early tasks to represent complexity and build theory. The second addresses developments in qualitative approach that present a danger (again, a strong term) to the entire endeavour. It begins by tracing the emergence of qualitative research as a reaction to the perceived failings and limitations of quantitative inquiry and assessing whether it has delivered on the promises made towards overcoming these. Unsurprisingly to those familiar with Hammersley's contribution to the field, qualitative research is shown to have failed in important respects both internally (in insufficiently fulfilling its promise of attaining better perspectival and processual understanding) and externally (in neither adequately responding to criticisms made by quantitative researchers, nor sufficiently using these as opportunities for growth). Some telling observations are made: the often limited gaze of the sociological eye is portrayed as having turned Becker's hierarchy of credibility on its head by rarely focusing on dominant groups, while, intriguingly, quantitative approaches are shown to often exist implicitly within qualitative research generating implications for attempts to deflect criticism. Hammersley's keen engagement with these problems shows a readiness to discern the reasons for such failures and to understand them. This is clear in his acknowledgement that there may have been problems inherent in the very initial commitments of qualitative research. With his insider's knowledge, he takes qualitative inquiry to the cleaners and all of the dirty washing lies open to view.

The critique is methodical in clarity and delivery. Hammersley's questioning of the underlying rationales for qualitative research leads him to examine the tensions that arise between the complexity of the social world (which qualitative research claims to capture) and the reduction inevitable in any attempt at scientific representation or theoretical explanation. Hence, adherence to such sacred commitments as prizing the capture of such complexity above producing knowledge is questioned. Two chapters take the case studies of thick description and analytic induction and explore how ambiguities in their definition and interpretation have resulted in a variety of practical applications. Here a question could be raised that, whilst the chapter on thick description covers the work of Ryle and essentially Geertz, the discussion in the chapter on analytic induction is

limited by the researchers examined (Znaniecki, Lindesmith, Cressey, Becker and Turner). Whilst their selection is, of course, defended, it reveals that this is a particular telling of the qualitative research tradition (much like the various tellings of Chicago sociology). Hence, Hammersley misses the chance to illustrate the intersection between how qualitative inquiry has been understood theoretically and translated into practice in the UK. Qualitative researchers from the Lancaster School, Cardiff, Edinburgh or Aberdeen (all key sites offering critical mass at various times within the 40-year time span Hammersley defines), could have offered an alternative appraisal. Hammersley, to do him justice, is clear where his own tradition and disciplinary training lies. Nevertheless, these sections are indicative of where two criticisms of the book overall lie: it is very much a text-based summary of the current state of qualitative research and it is also a particular telling of that qualitative research's history, in a UK context, and from one UK training or perspective (Manchester and the Sociology of Education). We later return to these points.

The analysis in the second half of the book justifies the use of the term crisis. Inevitably, this is where Hammersley's tradition meets thinking originating across the Atlantic (centrally Denzin, Lincoln, Lather, MacLure, discourse analysis). Here Hammersley evaluates contemporary debates within the field – and vitally – their implications. In the chapter (with Gomm) addressing the radical critique of interviews, the dangers of over-reliance on interviews are highlighted for the traditionalist, as are the inconsistencies within the radical critique. The argument is tempered, in that such debates serve to heighten our sense of caution about the dynamics of the interview situation and what we can and cannot derive from interviews, but this is where Hammersley draws the line. The positions reached by advocates of the radical critique about the limitations imposed on methodology are exposed and compelling alternatives (that do not require such radical shifts) advocated. The following chapter makes clear his reaction against such radicalism, with an evaluation of whether conversation and discourse analysis constitute self-sufficient paradigms. A sustained case is made against such self-sufficiency and in place a suggestion that such techniques, with their capacity to yield valuable and interesting findings, should be considered *additional* methods within a research strategy. This chapter, for all its strengths, lacks a full discussion of how to reconcile this suggested approach with that of those who actually use conversation and discourse analysis, as the beliefs governing the use of these methods (as explicated here) reject the validity and thus the use of any less radical methods.

In the final chapters of *Questioning Qualitative Inquiry*, the author's rising sense of frustration with the inadequacies and logical inconsistencies underpinning more radical approaches to qualitative research becomes increasingly palpable. Fundamentally, Hammersley questions the assumptions of endeavour falling under the heading of qualitative research that re-specifies the goal of social science to such a great extent as to negate the meaning and relevance of inquiry and its potential contributions to knowledge. This is a conservative stance, albeit one clearly argued, and is never more apparent than in the discussion on qualitative research writing. Here, when the tricky issue of re-specification arises (in an excellent discussion on power, clarity and persuasiveness) a clear distinction is drawn between qualitative research as rhetoric and

using rhetorical strategies to convey particular meanings. The stance advocated is one containing a judgment about where the concerns of qualitative writing should (and in some recent cases, *should not*) lie. The last chapter further clarifies upon what basis qualitative research can be evaluated. In a well-rounded consideration of potential criteria and their usefulness in evaluating the quality of qualitative research, it becomes apparent that this discussion is conducted largely on the model of research projects that have distinct aims from the outset and thus can be evaluated based on having met them. This is a little confusing, as something other than this was tantalisingly dangled in front of the reader in earlier chapters: namely an emphasis upon the very flexibility of qualitative methods being essential to realising an *appreciation* of what is found in the field.

Hammersley has addressed past (and in some cases misguided) criticism that he neglects new debates. Such criticism does not hold here, despite, as noted earlier, that it is partial in places (W.I. Thomas' part in Znaniecki's stance on method is relegated to a footnote and given *The Polish Peasant's* methodological notes' standing and the Thomas Theorem's impact, this is surprising). Having said that, it is our contention that the number of scholars in the UK capable of delivering a text of such breadth and depth of engagement can be counted on one hand. This book is, without question, an apposite and powerful contribution and addition to a trail-blazing portfolio of some seven, sole-authored texts within the field. The use of a variety of literatures to make points (from Blumer to Carroll) indicates a mellower tone than previous works such as *What's Wrong with Ethnography?* (for which *Questioning Qualitative Inquiry* could be a second edition with an expanded remit). Hammersley's target has always been researchers' adopting (wittingly or unwittingly) incommensurable paradigms that they perceive to negate engaging with such issues. Indeed, given that Hammersley has repeatedly called for a sober dialogue about the state of qualitative research since *WWW* in 1992, and considering the intractable nature of many of these questions (on which he is clear he does not have the answers), we might ponder on what state of affairs he *would* be happy with.

Hammersley's work is never an easy read, when other authors such as the late Ian Craib possessed the deft skill of making equally complex ideas accessible. Despite this, *Questioning Qualitative Inquiry* is essential reading for both the post-graduate student confronted by overwhelming methodological pluralism and the established scholar sitting comfortably in their ontological comfort-zone. For both groups, it will be important to note that, whilst levelling some very serious criticisms at both mainstream and postmodern qualitative researchers, Hammersley is a man very much inside the tent, rather than outside it (to paraphrase Lyndon Johnson). As to the future, the response of the postmodernist researcher to such dangers as highlighted here would be welcome and of great interest. We suspect that the generosity and depth of scholarly explication Hammersley has extended to them will not be reciprocated. We hope to be proven wrong.

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