



Introduction: Engaging Qualitative Geography

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In this chapter we welcome you to the *Handbook of Qualitative Geography*, and describe what we believe to be the significant issues and challenges for qualitative human geography in the twenty-first century. Our goal for this volume is to introduce scholars, both veteran and novice, to the world of qualitative geography, and to engage them in the collective and collaborative process of forwarding qualitative geography in the twenty-first century. This, we recognize, is a challenge in itself, for this handbook, like the handbooks in other fields that came before, seeks to reach and engage multiple audiences. We aim in partnership with the chapter authors to engage advanced and graduate students preparing to undertake their first major qualitative projects, established scholars already richly experienced in diverse approaches to qualitative research, those scholars who wish to broaden their horizons into new areas of qualitative research, and we also welcome those who are considering qualitative research for the first time. Often, these audiences may come together, as in a graduate seminar where instructors and students collaboratively launch productive

discussions about the issues and ideas raised by the chapters. Our hope is to engage geographers in a thought-provoking, ongoing, and ever-developing discussion of how to *do* qualitative geography, and to persuade others, from other fields, of the value of our spatial perspectives.

The early twenty-first century marks a marvelous time for qualitative geography. In concert with what some have called a 'quiet methodological revolution' across the social and policy sciences as well as the humanities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005a: ix), geography is fostering an efflorescence in the prevalence and sophistication of qualitative research. The abundance of high-quality qualitative research reveals itself in academic journals and conferences, in dissertation research by newly-minted PhDs and in book-length works by more seasoned scholars. It is evident, as well, in the diverse range of qualitative methods productively and insightfully employed by contemporary geographers, many of which are engaged in this volume. Meanwhile, there has been 'spatial turn' as well, across a range of disciplines as many researchers look to the spatialities and

geographies of the social world, and, as we shall suggest, attend to the spatialities of research itself.

Significantly, the proliferation of qualitative geography marks not just an increase in output, but also an increase in methodological acuity and sophistication among geographers. The 'just do it' approach to qualitative research of past decades – where geographers entered the field with little preparation or training – has largely been shelved in favor of an active engagement in the complexities of 'explicitly qualitative research' in geography that we now see addressed by an array of books and articles *about* qualitative research, as well as an increasing number of specialized courses in PhD-granting geography programs (DeLyser, 2008: 235; Martin, this volume).

Looking back over the past decades, it is clear that qualitative methods have ceased to be on the fringe of our discipline, and that they are today vital to our current practice of human geography. That transformation emerged not without challenge – the rise of qualitative geography has been (and in some places continues to be) the subject of resistance and controversy, anger and acrimony, as other methods seemed to some to be challenged, and qualitative methods appeared, according to the norms of physical science, anecdotal, not replicable, and not generalizable (see, for example, Openshaw, 1998; Martin, 2001; Fotheringham 2006; Crang 2002; 2003). We regard those attacks as now largely historic, and in this volume we stand ready not just to argue for the importance and relevance of qualitative work, but also to broaden and refine both the scope of the methods used and their practice in human geography. And since these methods are no longer novel imports from other disciplines, this seems a good time to also ask what a geographic sensibility might have to offer to their practice.

In this handbook we seek to contribute to the discussions of what a geographical approach to qualitative methods looks like and what it offers, in a text that aims to treat

the issues and topics of qualitative human geography at a peer-to-peer level. We seek, in this volume, not just to review what has been done, but to offer an agenda of what can be done. Thus, at a vibrant time for qualitative research in human geography, the authors and editors of this volume seek to engage our peers, and our future peers, in spirited debates about the future of qualitative geography.

In so doing, we seek to address four pressures that confront contemporary qualitative geographers in different ways: our interactions with other methods and processes of research; our approaches to issues of relevance in a world where political issues and policy concerns may at times strike a delicate balance with poststructural academic engagements; our understandings of the difference that a geographical perspective itself makes to qualitative research; and finally our own theoretical innovations and movements that may push away from the humanist and social-constructivist foundations of qualitative geography. While each chapter addresses these pressures in different ways, in this introduction we assess them explicitly, in the context of a broader discussion that situates qualitative research within human geography. First, though, we briefly introduce the book's structure and chapters.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Since the purpose of this book is to engage readers in conversations about how to conceive of, carry out, and carry forward qualitative research in the twenty-first century, we have organized the text into three sections designed to mirror the ways that the qualitative-research process is often, though by no means always, experienced. The three sections of the book move from conceptualizing research (and the researcher's place within it) and situating that in broader academic, political, and social currents, through multiple and intersecting means of carrying out research, to issues and processes of broader

engagement and circulation. Each chapter author draws from qualitative research in various fields, and also draws upon their own research experiences, linking those to the themes of the chapters to show, through the experiences of these individuals, how the ground-up empirical details of qualitative research can be linked to the broader social, theoretical, political, and policy concerns of qualitative geographers. While the introductions to each of the sections outlines their content in more detail, here we offer a brief sketch of the contents of the book, drawing on examples from just a few of the chapters to provide a flavor of the vivid and varied world of discovery we believe readers will find in qualitative geography, and in this handbook.

Part I, 'Openings' features chapters that introduce the history of qualitative research, and examine the multifaceted positioning of the researcher in social, political and theoretical contexts. These chapters each engage in different ways the complex epistemological, ontological, and philosophical backbones of qualitative geography. They situate the researcher within the disciplinary (and trans-disciplinary) historical formations that shape qualitative inquiry, and frame the explorations of individual methods in the next section. So, for example, Meghan Cope situates her own work within the history of qualitative research in geography, while Sarah Elwood links her participatory-GIS research to the broader issues of ontology and epistemology that arise when qualitative and quantitative methods are mixed.

Part II, 'Encounters and Collaborations' includes chapters that each engage, in detail, with a particular strategy of inquiry, a particular qualitative method. Here, the tools and techniques used by qualitative geographers are described, challenged, and urged forward. Some chapters address established methods widely used in geography. In Hayden Lorimer's case, qualitative geographers have long undertaken archival research, but few have discussed it from a methodological standpoint. Here Lorimer uses dust

as both object and metaphor to think through what he terms the 'make-do-methods' of archival practices, mustering his work with elderly reindeer herders in Scotland to show how archival research can transcend the archive. Nancy and James Duncan traverse the well-traveled terrain of landscape interpretation, before moving to explore the implications of post-structuralist understandings of landscape for their own work in Sri Lanka and New York, and pointing out the methodological implications of such an approach to conceptualizing landscape.

Other chapters in this section engage methods with which geographers are likely less familiar. David Butz uses his research with villagers in rural Pakistan to show how auto-ethnography can be moved from a study of the self within the research to embrace also the complex constructions of selves that his ethnographic participants seek to convey to him and others. Peter Jackson and Polly Russell mobilize their life-history interviews with poultry farmers in Britain to show how such rich sources can reveal the narrative structures within which people situate their lives, and, in so doing (and like Butz's work), shed light on how people seek to convey themselves to themselves, and others.

The chapters in Part III, 'Making Sense' embrace and critique the ways that qualitative research is analyzed, interpreted, and communicated – and show how those processes might be moved into the future. Ideas addressed in the first section, and methods addressed in the second, are now directly related to the communication of research – to a broader geographical praxis. Here, for example, Garth Myers draws connections between his fieldwork in Tanzania, his academic position at a US university, and post-colonial theory, to examine the negotiations between the personal and the political that qualitative researchers must engage. And Paul Routledge details his participation with the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army in the UK to explore power relations in the constructions of activist geographies that are themselves designed to empower resisting

others to take control of their own lives in the face of oppressive power relations.

However undertaken and with whatever aims, qualitative research is a *process* that begins with the biographically situated, physically embodied researcher – the researcher who themselves are shaped and influenced in ongoing ways by issues of class, ‘race,’ ethnicity, gender, age, ability, sexuality, and community (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005b). To sum up, in the most straightforward sense, each qualitative geographer begins with themselves, and moves both outward and inward to research questions that may originate in the researcher’s training and theoretical background, but must be embedded in the community and/or environment the researcher studies. The researcher uses themselves as a ‘research instrument’ – collecting data, but also filtering, feeling, experiencing, and analyzing field experiences and challenging personal understandings. Qualitative researchers recognize our own involvement in creating, not just describing the worlds we study. And we work *with* (not ‘on’) the communities we study. We seek to give voice to those with whom we work, but most often it is we who write the reports, we who author the articles – the qualitative researcher, as a trained analyst, uses her or his own skills and her or his own voice to focus the experiences of others, and to help the voices of others speak more loudly, or more clearly, (most often) in an academic arena (see chapters by DeLyser, MacKian, Myers, and Routledge in this volume).

Thus, the qualitative-research process engages the socially and biographically situated researcher and her or his training, experience, and background; it entangles those in ongoing ways with the communities studied; and it links the situated researcher to theoretical ideas current in academic discourse, as well as to political and policy concerns, in order to further those issues.

In short, the organization of the book is designed to take researchers through the process of conceptualizing and carrying out qualitative research, where theory is linked to

methods or strategies of inquiry, where the multiply situated researcher engages the empirical world, and where what we once thought of as ‘research results’ are sensitively communicated both to the communities engaged and the community of scholars of which the researcher is part.

Because our goal has been to create a benchmark volume, one that pushes issues and debates in qualitative geography to the edges of the envelope, we realize too that not all readers will necessarily agree with the arguments in each chapter. Indeed, each chapter is an individual social construction by its author(s), working with the editors, to convey a dialog we believe is important to put forward. Different authors and different editors would have created very different chapters. And that is as it should be. Thus, we see this volume not only as one summation of state-of-the-art qualitative geography, but also as a launching point for new discussions and new engagements, new issues and new ideas. We welcome your feedback – in correspondence, at conferences, in publications – as we together embrace and create the futures of qualitative geography. In what follows here, we highlight the four arenas of debate and development.

THE RESISTED RISE OF QUALITATIVE GEOGRAPHY

Qualitative research, as Meghan Cope’s chapter in this volume illustrates, has always been part of the practice of human geography. But the broad acceptance of contemporary, methodologically articulate qualitative research has been, in many places and many cases, hard won. It was, after all, just about a half-century ago, that the long-enduring efforts of the ‘quantitative revolution’ sought to transform the discipline. The goals of that broad movement are understandable in the context of the post-WWII Anglo/American academy: to transform geography from an ideographic discipline concerned only with

the specific, to one nomothetic, one engaged in the pursuit of general principles or 'laws' of science, and, in so doing, achieve recognition for the discipline among the natural sciences. Aligned, for the most part, with a putatively positivist science, quantitative geography forged forward, carried on waves of technological advances (in statistical methods and computational capability), constructing and employing large data sets in the pursuit of generalizable knowledge until, for a time in the mid-twentieth century, a quantitative-inspired paradigm became dominant in the discipline (for narratives see Cloke *et al.*, 1991; Livingstone, 1993; Johnstone and Sidaway, 2004).

Amid this fervor for numerical sophistication and explanation, qualitative human geographers, traditionally mute on the subject of methods and methodology, initially offered little response. By the 1970s, however, humanist, feminist, and some radical geographers argued for a qualitative *human* geography that recognized and validated human experience, and they led campaigns for the recognition of qualitative work as valid and valuable (Cloke *et al.*, 1991; Livingstone, 1993; Johnstone and Sidaway, 2004; Crang, 2005; DeLyser, 2008; Cope, this volume). For some committed positivists (though these have always been a minority among quantitative researchers) and quantitative modelers these efforts to gain acceptance of qualitative work were received as a battle for primacy and/or a threat to claims to be a scientific discipline – the rise of qualitative work that was theoretically and methodologically sophisticated came to be seen as a challenge to the supremacy of the quantitative episteme. In some quarters of the discipline a qualitative-quantitative divide emerged that appeared to pitch practitioners against one another, and advocates of a narrowly scientized discipline continued for decades to argue against the 'squelchy soft approaches' of qualitative geography (Cloke *et al.*, 1991; Livingstone, 1993; Johnstone and Sidaway, 2004; the quote is from Openshaw, 1998: 317; see also Martin, 2001).

The absence, in qualitative research, of large-N data sets, and the widespread avoidance, by qualitative researchers, of statistical analyses, led many (both inside and outside of qualitative research) to mistakenly equate qualitative research with research without numbers (Bogdan and Ksander, 1980). This superficial understanding of qualitative research as 'ungeneralizable,' or idiographic, led to a ready classification of such work as not 'scientific' according to the models of physical science (see Openshaw, 1998; Martin, 2001 for vitriolic assessments). True enough: qualitative researchers do not engage in hypothesis testing and laboratory experiments. Indeed, as Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln remind us in their *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, the very word qualitative implies 'an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency' (2005b: 10). Sympathetic studies have attempted to reconcile this profound ontological and epistemological difference through, for instance, the widely held realist formulation that qualitative research uses intensive rather than extensive methods (Sayer and Morgan, 1986). Thus statistical analysis looks at the (extensive) regularities and patterns of outcomes while qualitative methods examine the mechanisms, processes and practices in intensive detail. This elegant squaring of the circle often then suggested some harmonious 'triangulation' of methods, offering complementary perspectives. While appealing, this synthesis has come under strain for attending to neither of the truth claims and constructions of the methods which tend to proceed from incommensurable understandings of the social world – and indeed the notion of a depth ontology relating processes to structural patterns has itself been subjected to consistent critique (but see Elwood in this volume on the ontological and epistemological challenges and rewards of mixed-methods research).

Qualitative researchers work explicitly to explore the world in its found form (in work that is termed, for that reason, naturalistic). We recognize and validate the complexity of everyday life, the nuances of meaning-making in an ever-changing world, and the multitude of influences that shape human lived experience (pluralities from which quantitative summaries must abstract). We work to acknowledge the researcher's whole person as a research instrument in our interactions with the people with whom we work, and with whom we both collect and construct our empirical materials (our data). Qualitative researchers, as Denzin and Lincoln point out, 'stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is being studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. They seek to answer questions that stress *how* social experience is given meaning' (2005b: 10). Indeed, qualitative research places the researcher in and amongst the findings, rather than deploying the scientized rhetoric of the disembodied, neutral and detached observer.

Methodologically, the discipline of geography has a long and troubling history of using the figure of the detached observer, untrammelled by the social relations of the field and the academy, in ways that hid colonial, gendered and racialized forms of knowledge (Bondi and Domosh, 1992). Substantively, in geography in particular, given our discipline's long-standing commitments to understanding the roles of place in providing the ongoing sustenance (both material and symbolic) that enables any social group to perpetuate itself, the role of people, in turn, in shaping those places, and our understanding of space as more than a neutral surface upon which human and non-human phenomena are inscribed, qualitative methods rose to meet the challenges of immersing ourselves deeply in particular places that we might better understand how places themselves influence ways of life and understandings of the world, as well as how ways of life and understandings of the world

influence particular places (Ley, 1988; Herbert, 2000). However, this is rather more than simply suggesting the triumph of 'a real differentiation' after all these years, even if such a perspective does sensitize us to the situatedness and competing nature of world views. It is rather that the immersed and situated view points from the thick of things are now seen as better vantage points than some imagined Archimedean overlook.

Still, it has been only after decades of struggle for recognition, and at times it sometimes seems after both sides have fought each other to exhaustion, that we have arrived at the point where today, in most geography programs, scholars are able to move beyond the qualitative-quantitative divide that in the last half-century caused such animosity, acrimony, and anxiety. Today, most geographers recognize that qualitative and quantitative methods are not opposed to one another, but instead represent different ontological and epistemological approaches to knowledge and data – they may be used to answer different questions, and they do so in very different ways, from very different groundings. Though positivist/quantitative approaches once sought dominance in human geography, geographers of the twenty-first century (along with scholars across the humanities and social- and policy- sciences) now broadly recognize the importance of issues of meaning, perception, values, intentions, motivations, and understandings – issues that demand methods of inquiry that can access the subjectively experienced, ever-changing world 'live,' and in the places where those meanings and interpretations emerge. We recognize the complexity of everyday reality, the multitude of influences that shape lived experience, and the importance of the spatial contexts of human interaction. That is to say, we recognize the importance of qualitative approaches in human geography. We have also come to recognize the importance of geography to understand the situated nature of feelings, meaning, values, practices and knowledge. Indeed, we have come to acknowledge the importance of geographies

of knowledge in situating our accounts of these – relating field, audience and academy along with the relational positions of informants, researchers, and readers.

So too, it was not long ago that researchers both quantitative and qualitative aspired to achieve objectivity in their research with human subjects, and aimed to conduct that research from a distanced standpoint to acquire the gloss of scientific authority and respectability. Today, in most geography programs, scholars have been able to move beyond the simplistic subjective-objective dichotomy once imposed upon research, to understand instead a social world where pure objectivity is impossible because each researcher finds themselves enmeshed in the social world he or she studies, and where the understanding of lived experience (of both research participants and the researcher) calls for an empirically grounded and necessarily subjective approach that acknowledges the situatedness of all knowledge (Harraway, 1991; Dwyer and Limb, 2001; Harding, 2001; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005b). Indeed, qualitative geographers have come to understand that it is through prolonged and empathetic interactions with members of a social group that researchers can develop insights into the patterned regularities and meaning structures that shape group, individual, and place identities (Ley, 1988; Herbert, 2000).

Close to the action in these ways, qualitative geographers explore the rich tissue of social life in all its myriad and intricate forms, most often beginning from the ground up, working towards broader, contextualized understandings (Herbert, this volume; see Harding, 2001). And because qualitative researchers must generally become deeply enmeshed with the people and places we study, we are invariably affected through our full array of senses, and are forced to reckon with the wide array of emotions we feel as humans – making it impossible to pretend we are either purely objective or detached from our ‘data.’ In fact, as later chapters will show in detail, these sensual and emotional engagements are best seen not

as impediments to understanding but rather as vehicles for it (in addition to the chapters in this volume, see also McCormack, 2003; Bondi and Davidson, 2004; Davidson and Milligan, 2004; Thrift, 2004; Bondi, 2005; Davidson *et al.*, 2005).

Where laboratory-based researchers, building on the research of others, seek confirmation (or more rarely, strict positivists seek refutation) of an hypothesis they themselves generate through controlled experiments that they (and their assistants) conduct, contemporary qualitative geographers engage a ‘naturalistic’ approach to research – we leave the laboratory and the computer to study people, places, and phenomena as much as possible *in situ*, and seek to validate not only our own perspectives (because we all hold ideas about how the world works), but especially also the meanings that the people we work with bring to the topic of study, a topic that itself often emerges and always develops through the research process. Grounding theory in observation, interaction, analysis, and interpretation – or, as Clair Dwyer and Melanie Limb (2001: 11) put it, making theory ‘accountable to fieldwork’ – requires of qualitative geographers a commitment to actively engaging, through diverse means, the empirical worlds we study.

These commitments, in turn, require a creative and often open-minded, or open-ended approach to what was once called ‘data gathering.’ Techniques described in this book separately (of necessity, in order to engage them in detail) – techniques including participant observation and ethnography, interviewing, life history, focus groups, auto-ethnography, visual analysis, landscape interpretation, archival research, textual and discourse analysis, GIS, animal geographies, and non-representational approaches – are in practice often used in combinations, combinations that will be unique to each field site and each field experience; combinations that may even emerge in the moment once the research is already underway. Thus, although qualitative geographers plan our research in advance, the complex and ever-changing

intersubjective nature of research with human subjects calls for creative approaches to circumstances, the adaptation of old techniques, and the invention of new combinations – both in the planning and during the research. Qualitative research, as Denzin and Lincoln (2005b: 5) put it, is ‘inherently multi-method in focus.’ Today, with a strong tradition of methodologically sophisticated qualitative geography and with the battles of the qualitative-quantitative divide now mostly behind us, qualitative geographers pursue work not only from our own methodological groundings, but reach out also to incorporate quantitative work in mixed-methods research (see Elwood, this volume) as we strive to conduct research that is relevant and appropriate from methodological, political, academic, and policy standpoints.

BALANCING CONCERNS

If in the mid-twentieth century, the largest challenge to qualitative research in geography was posed by the quantitative revolution, by century’s end the social sciences and humanities were shaken by an entirely different challenge, that of the ‘crisis of representation’ emerging in the main from anthropology (Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Turner and Bruner, 1986; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1988; Clifford, 1988). And in the new century, new ideas about research as performative and as a more-than-representable act urged qualitative geography in yet other directions (see, for example, McCormack, 2003; Lorimer, 2005; Thien, 2005; Thrift, 2007). Through all these challenges, qualitative geographers have sought also to remain genuinely engaged with the communities where we place our work, and to many continue to produce work that is politically progressive and/or actively policy oriented. Importantly, in the midst of this, qualitative work has often walked the delicate lines between sympathy for and engagement with those we study while avoiding

uncritical cheerleading, even as we work through the awkward positions and issues of engaging with those – often but not always – in positions of power whose practices we might wish to critique. Viewing these challenges together, we can see issues of performance, relevance and praxis in a complex light.

It was the crisis of representation in the 1980s that challenged notions of reporting from a ‘real world’ out there and a correspondence theory of truth, and urged scholars across the social sciences and humanities to question the complex interconnections between our observations, our interpretations, and the realities we both perceive and represent in our work. Qualitative researchers in numerous fields, often led by feminist or postcolonial scholars, responded with written work that questioned the authority of the author, and sought new understandings of truth (McDowell, 1995; Jones *et al.*, 1997; Rosaldo, 1989). Distanced objectivity was discarded and situated positionality embraced through an understanding of the biographically situated researcher who yields influence in the outcomes of his or her own research. This new embrace led also to what Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 19) describe as the current ‘triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis’ and the ongoing rethinking of the role of qualitative research in the academy and the world at large.

In response to the ‘sordid legacies’ of social-science research practices linked to exploitative colonialist endeavors around the world as well as to cultures of deprivation and cycles of poverty within industrialized nations, qualitative research in the twenty-first century has become increasingly action-, policy-, and community-oriented (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005b: 1; see also Smith, 1999). As Denzin and Lincoln point out (2005b: 2), though there were colonialists before there were ethnographers, ‘there would be no colonial, and now no neocolonial, history were it not for this investigative mentality that turned the dark-skinned Other into the object of the ethnographer’s gaze. From the very

beginning, qualitative research was implicated in a racist project.' Today, aware of those legacies, involved in decolonization, and committed to 'creating spaces where those who are studied (the Other) can speak' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005b: 26), qualitative researchers across academic disciplines strive to engage in equitable and emancipatory research practices.

In geography, as Gail Davies and Claire Dwyer point out (2008: 399), an 'emphasis on the political and public intersections of research practice is now both commonplace and contested.' Critical geographic praxis, action research, and policy-oriented research seek social relevance and community engagement, at times from different standpoints. Some uphold a distinction between 'applied' forms of geographic engagement that serve the interests of the state or business, and a critical geographical praxis (Fuller and Kitchin, 2004). But even research that proves useful to the government (perhaps for its policy applications) need not slavishly serve the state. Much qualitative work follows the tradition that seeks to both give voice to those unheard or silenced by the powerful, and also to speak truth, or at least their truths, back to power (perhaps the apogee of this work is partisan participation; see Routledge this volume). As Rachel Pain (2006: 251) carefully points out, policy-oriented, applied geographers are often engaged in 'counter-policy research' that resists and offers critiques of the state's policies. Further, distinguishing between 'applied geographers ... as uncritical servants of the state, while critical geographers actively challenge the status quo' (Pain, 2006: 253) does little to further anyone's emancipatory agenda, and, as Fuller and Kitchin (2004: 3) remind us, until relatively recently, few geographers (of any stripe) 'had married their empirical research, activism, and writing' agendas. Participatory, emancipatory, and policy-oriented research can, as the chapters in this volume illustrate, be richly engaged, on the ground, from multiple academic orientations (see chapters by

Aitken, Herbert, Jensen and Glasmeier, Elwood, Watson and Till, Butz, Myers, Routledge, and Martin). The point, as feminist geographers have made clear, is that we seek 'an academic praxis that is emancipatory and empowering for the participants in the research' (Fuller and Kitchin, 2004: 3; Jones *et al.*, 1997). There are many ways such a valuable commitment can be made manifest, but it is also revealing in itself as a statement, since it reflects how much qualitative work has focused on representing silenced or invisible knowledges, rather than unpacking the hegemonic.

This understanding of engaged knowledge production has not been easily achieved nor is it uncontested, but, as each of the chapters in this volume reveals, such questions have been richly addressed by qualitative geographers leading to different answers, different engagements, and different kinds of qualitative geography. What is perhaps most important, as Stuart Aitken urges in his chapter in this volume, is the ethic of care with which contemporary qualitative research is conducted.

Geographies of qualitative research

The chapters in this book each demonstrate explicitly, in their own ways, what difference place and space make to qualitative research, and what a geographic sensibility brings to qualitative research. Some of the broader points deserve attention here as well, for sometimes geographers are too quickly drawn into simplistic and mechanistic definitions of place and space that can become a way of too rigidly framing the world. Because, of course, all activities take place somewhere, space is everywhere, and connected in perhaps banal-seeming ways to everything we do – so much so that it may at times seem not worth mentioning. Nevertheless, space is uneven and differentiated, and so 'places' differ. It is for precisely these reasons that it is crucial to take account of spatial difference and inequalities

methodologically – the intensive methods of qualitative research are geared specifically to illuminate the taken-for-granted and to establish the significance of being ‘here,’ rather than ‘there.’ But one of the challenges posed in research on place is that, as humans, we are profoundly attached to particular places, and that may at times overwhelm our abilities to say something articulate about them. Here too, the intensive methods of qualitative research can help shed light on beneath-the-surface meanings.

Careful qualitative research also helps us transcend the binary space and place were once relegated to in geography, where space was seen as an abstraction (perhaps akin to a flat Euclidean surface awaiting the mapping of people’s activities), while places were infused with the senses of identity and belonging from which meaning is derived (Cresswell, 2004). Such a binary – easy to slip into – at times continues to hold sway among geographers, and all too easily leads to aligning qualitative work with lived place and quantitative work with abstract space. But the restrictions imposed by such binary views can be revealed by attempting to nest other concepts like community, neighborhood, landscape, and care-scape into either of the two categories. As the chapters in this book reveal (see, for example, Aitken, Watson and Till, Lorimer, and Dewsbury), contemporary qualitative geographers work beyond such simplified conceptualizations. Indeed, these efforts to understand, in complex and ongoing ways, not just space and place, but also the mutual constitution of spaces, places, and human behavior at all scales are crucial for qualitative researchers – be they geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, urban planners, or economists. At the very least, not doing so risks the possibility of losing important contexts and relations. At worst, we lose important social, cultural, economic, and political insights.

Qualitative research in many fields has at times been seen as exclusively concerned with the local (and the ideographic). But recent geographic work has shown that even small places are not isolated, not defined

only by the local, but are interconnected, unbounded in space and time, and that places may more appropriately be seen as relationally ‘articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings’ (Massey, 1993: 66). Places, in other words, are constituted by processes that transect multiple scales, and are constituted out of the spatial and temporal relations between differently scaled and embedded processes. Certainly the sense of a localizable, containable field site – where one might find one culture occupying one bounded place – comes under pressure as material, political, social, economic, and cultural relations are stretched through space and time to work interactively with any given space, place, and environment, creating social relations of empowerment and disempowerment, connection and disconnection (Marston, 2000). This raises the issue of how to conduct ethnography and qualitative research in general at an ‘awkward scale,’ bridging worlds of power, knowledge and material flows (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2003). The task for contemporary qualitative geographers (that the chapters in this volume, particularly those by Aitken, Herbert, Jensen and Glasmeier, Elwood, Watson and Till, Butz, and Duncan and Duncan, Lorimer, Myers, Routledge, and Martin address) is to engage the people we work with, and the places where we work, across diverse social sites, challenging and revealing the complexity of a locally globalized world, to ‘recover the local as a site of significant practices’ that upset the overarching discourse of globalization, engaging relations of production and social reproduction alike to gain ‘theoretical and practical purchase on the very places where ideas are formed, actions are produced, and relationships are created and maintained’ (Marston *et al.*, 2005: 427) – and with this to factor the different localities, scales and relations between them in the production of academic knowledge itself.

However, even the awareness or recognition of a sense of place in fieldwork is something oddly and unfortunately attenuated in much geographical scholarship, especially

work based around interviews. So, for example, geographers grounding their research in semi-structured interviews often have little to say about the place of the fieldwork, excepting some commentary focused at the macro scale (the city or region, though in multi-sited work that too often disappears), with virtually no discussion of the micro-locales of the research (the offices, meeting rooms etc.). At the level of methodological practice, simply paying heed to where we conduct our interviews and focus groups is hugely influential to the kinds of knowledge we create, even if printing those insights may lead to challenges at the level of ethical practice, since identifying specific places (a factory, an office) in published work may breach confidentiality and put individuals at risk.

Recent work by those attuned to (and willing to write about) the differences such spaces may make in research suggests that we think through how the spaces of our fieldwork both constrain and enable different people to say different things. Beyond the important thoughtfulness that interview locations be accessible, different field settings also offer affordances to different sorts of interactions. Some interviewees may be unable to speak freely in their offices, others with their partner or parent in the same room, others still may be put off by a setting's ambience – too formal, too masculinist, too public. Conversations, and the power structures that underlie those conversations, are shaped, in part, by the settings where they take place (Valentine, 1999; Elwood and Martin, 2000; McDowell, 2001; Sin, 2003; see also the chapters by McDowell, Jackson and Russell, Bosco and Herman, and Butz in this volume). But attention to a fixed place of interview is not the only means of further understanding the micro-geographies of qualitative research. Indeed, we might look as well to a more mobile and active use of locales, where, for instance, a walk in the neighborhood may help people recall and talk through events, or organize their thoughts (Anderson, 2004; Kusenbach, 2003).

Neither has much traditional ethnographic work in geography work paid more nuanced

heed to place and space. While sensitive, to be sure, to the role of place in the lives of informants, geographers have had less to say on the constitution of the field as a site of investigation. Drawing from (traditional work in) anthropology, ethnographic work in geography long presented the field site as a singular totality to be described in all its aspects in order to enable readers to grasp the embedded logics and values of the 'local people.' But in the contemporary world of global connectivity and mobility, that spatial sense of a field site as bounded and locatable may be no longer tenable. Contemporary multi-site and trans-local ethnographies draw our attention to how studying a culture is no longer about simply going 'there' and studying 'it,' because 'it' is 'simultaneously supralocal, translocal and local, simultaneously planetary and, refracted through the shards of vernacular cultural practices, profoundly parochial' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2003: 151; see also Burawoy *et al.*, 2000). Through such research our sense of the spatiality of the field is being expanded and refashioned to explore the complex entanglements of scales, venues, milieus, movements, and mobilities, leading to a rethinking of the spaces of ethnographic fieldwork and their connections (see Marcus, 1998; Hyndman, 2001; Hannerz, 2003; Cook, 2004; Katz, 2004; Watson and Till, and Butz this volume).

Other recent work in the discipline has pointed to the spatial construction of knowledge itself as an area for geographic investigation – to think of both the academy and the field as sites of knowledge production, with different practices often applying within each. Geographers have begun to consider the relations between these spaces and how they structure the production of knowledge not just 'out there' in the field but back 'in here,' in the often un- or under-examined academy (Crang, 2003: 139–40; Crang, 2005) and how that produces what has been called the 'expanded field' (Crang and Cook, 2007: 133, 170). Such efforts seek to deliberately disrupt the division in many academic practices that keep separate the various spaces of practice, research, analysis,

interpretation, and presentation (see chapters by Jensen and Glasmeier, Lorimer, DeLyser, MacKian, Myers, Routledge, and Martin, in this volume).

Historically, a distinction between field science versus home-based research is often traced back to the arguments of Georges Cuvier and Alexander von Humboldt. Cuvier argued it was in the academy that one could make analytic connections prohibited by the particularities of the field, or as he put it 'it is only in one's study that one can roam freely throughout the universe' making the academy a kind of nowhere outside the world (Massey, 2003: 75) – that it was only men who had a study in an academic institution or even a room of their own at home is less often remembered. More recently, the classic work of the Chicago School of sociology with their oft-cited but now all-too-rarely-read ethnographies provides other ready examples of the binary between fieldwork and office work, empirically grounded and abstract concepts. Their detailed books on different districts of the city, where each district was seen as particular and localized, can be seen in contrast to their abstract diagram of concentric circles now free-floating and universal, detached from the field (Gieryn, 2006). Indeed through all their work there is, Thomas Gieryn argues, an oscillation between spatialities of 'here' and 'anywhere' – moving from specific, grounded findings to generalized, abstract statement; from field to laboratory; from a discourse celebrating immersion to one privileging detachment. It is this notion of a detached, placeless, 'God-trick' (Haraway, 1991) that a spatiality of an expanded field seeks to overcome by connecting and embedding the spaces of fieldwork and analysis.

But we may go farther as well, because the field encounter and its particularities sanction so much qualitative work with not just the authority, but also the responsibility, of being there, of being a witness (Marcus, 2005). As Davies and Dwyer note, qualitative geography is 'increasingly expected to be mobile' in multiple ways: whether through

transnational research, knowledge transfer, or transdisciplinarity, the value of our research may be increasingly seen to stem from 'its ability to move from the contexts of production to those of application and collaboration, from the university to policy' (2008: 400). Such movements, in turn, demand

increasing sophistication in conceptualizing the links between spaces of public engagement and the spaces and relations of everyday life, to trace how political subjectivities may be further transformed or sustained as they move across space ... and to chart the time-spaces through which personal and political trajectories may unfold over time... (Davies and Dwyer, 2008: 403–4).

They point to thinking about the processes of translation, mobilization, and connection entailed in devising work in the academy in order to make claims relevant to others (Davies and Dwyer, 2008). In this sense, then, we may be refashioning a sense of academics as translators and interpreters rather than legislators or 'scientists' establishing truth claims (Bauman, 1987). And this is translation not as a background process, but translation staged as the enactment of producing qualitative research, where the very staging of making sense is seen as part of the research process, part of the research, and part of the research result (see DeLyser, and MacKian, this volume). Even so, we must remain aware of the ever-present constraints on who may 'be there' based on class, income, gender, age, ethnicity, ability, and personal responsibilities to multiple others. The old pattern of categorical inequalities continues to structure research access. Nevertheless, if we understand processes rather than objects of knowledge, that offers some beginnings to think through new theoretical challenges for qualitative research.

ONWARD, WITH OUR OWN TRADITIONS

Some recent work in qualitative geography has begun to push in broadly affective

and 'more-than-representational' directions (Lorimer, 2005; Davies and Dwyer, 2007). This takes many forms, from one building on Actor Network Theory to a post-phenomenology, from geographies of practice to emotional geographies, but key tenets across this work include a skepticism about knowledge, self-knowledge, and representations – about explaining a part of the world in terms of something else, as these contemporary qualitative geographers often express a wariness of using theory to explain events, or society to explain technology, or representations to explain practices. Together, such work encompasses very different efforts by qualitative geographers to move beyond the ways social analysis can (inadvertently) solidify, stabilize, and embalm social life in order to make it an object of study and representation. And that rejection of stability proffers instead a world of multiplicities and uncertainties where clarity may not be achievable, or desirable (Law, 2004; Laurier and Philo, 2006; Davies and Dwyer, 2007). As Sarah Whatmore has put it (2003: 89–90), the spoken and written word have constituted, for qualitative geographers, the primary forms of 'data,' but the world holds many voices, speaking through many different types of things that may 'refuse to be reinvented as univocal witnesses.' Thus, recent work often shares a sense of multiple worlds in motion, worlds concerned with doings, makings, happenings, and feelings, rather than strictly images, texts, or results; and of worlds of uncertainty, '[i]mpasses, silences and aporias' rather than observable/reportable certainties (Laurier and Philo, 2006: 353).

Such efforts draw attention to a methodological conundrum: much qualitative geography has embraced an unquestioned balance between ontological constructivism and epistemological realism (Crang, 2001). In other words, we have looked carefully and critically at how people make diverse truths, but much of that work has taken a fairly straightforward (and uncritical) approach to how we, in turn, represent those truths. And that may

be especially true in making claims for our research, and indeed in following an imperative to speak truth to power.

If we have above (and, collectively, before) addressed debates on the value of and issues with epistemological realism in human geography, these new works ask us to continue pursuing that, and now also to rethink the construction of the world to include not just the agency of those we study along with that of the researcher in shaping that world, but also the agency of the material and biological worlds in our work and our world (see chapters by Wolch and Seymour, and Dewsbury in this volume). This is not to reinforce a dichotomy between the material and immaterial, but rather to encourage attention to the ephemeral, the fleeting, the immanence of things and places (Davies and Dwyer, 2007).

These works urge us to rethink, from different (and divergent) theoretical perspectives, the assumptions of humanistic geography in qualitative research – assumptions about meaning making, about knowledges, about agency, and about forms of representing the world. They further urge us to move onward in our longstanding engagements with the emotional and the embodied natures of our research encounters and again rethink 'what it means to 'know' something, and thus ... open social science research to different kinds of knowing evidenced through embodiment or emotionality' in ways of knowing that 'shift from comprehension to apprehension' (Davies and Dwyer, 2007: 258).

Meanwhile, some who accept the critiques and insights this new theoretical work offers ask too about its customarily formidable level of abstraction, where empirical research with others (the perhaps more traditional qualitative methods of interviewing or participant observation, for example) is most often sublimated in favor of research grounded in the writer's own carefully deconstructed experience. Arguments about solipsism once put forward in response to feminist directives for self-reflexivity in research are

raised anew. And further, there is current concern that the 'pure, blank spaces of social encounter offered up as open-ended, experimental arenas for the forging of a revisionist, expressive ethics of affect' (Lorimer, 2008: 3) might erase the very embedded senses of different experiences, lives, circumstances, pressures, and possibilities at the core of so much qualitative work.

Perhaps we are working, in multiple ways, with multiple methods, to found a geographical praxis that may speak to a world always in the making. Eric Laurier and Chris Philo, for example, have offered to view what some see as the 'threat' proffered by non-representational theory to the legacy of the 'cultural turn' in geography as promise instead.

A promise of beginning inquiries less fixated on solving or explaining problems in theory *with theory*; a promise to return to just what our wordy worlds have to offer in their shatterproof transparency, their abundant detail and their living motion. ... [To] undertake investigations that do not begin by *defining* their phenomenon, but seek instead to learn from the investigation what defining, describing, proving, caring, observing, sharing, encountering or even breakfast...might be. ... [To] re-find (to re-search) the wonder of perfectly everyday events, full of possibilities, representational and not-representational. ... [For] there is so much to learn from continuing to revisit the places that (we assume) we already know (about) (Laurier and Philo, 2006: 353, 355, 356).

Nevertheless, a call to attend to affect and emotion, as well as the spontaneous, may not be enough without guidance on what to look for or what matters – a careful methodological exploration of these new possibilities is in order (and is addressed, in different ways, by the chapters that follow). Embedded in the needs of representation and translation, after all, lie also connection and 'throwntogether-ness,' (Massey, 2005) as well as possibilities to channel senses of becomings and the hope to forward emancipatory agendas. What this may suggest is research as a material practice of translation not only between conceptual worlds, but as a practical, embodied, interactive, co-constitutive process. As John Law has argued, our messy world is ordered

through analytical practices that tend to focus only on a narrow range of appropriate objects, practices that make some things apparent because we have distorted them into clarity (2004: 2). He continues:

So it seems to me that we're balancing on a knife-edge. We want to order. In particular, we hope to tell stories about social ordering. But we don't want to do violence in our own ordering. And in particular we don't want to pretend that our ordering is complete, or conceal the work, the pain, and the blindnesses that went into it. It is an uncomfortable knife-edge. It violates most of the inclinations and dispositions that we have acquired in generations of commitment to 'the scientific method' and its social, political and personal analogues (Law, 1994: 8).

Acknowledging this analytical praxis of translation and transformation is far from the Cartesian geography of the subject, located and fixed at the center of events (who 'thinks' and 'is'). Indeed, as Law points out, 'ethnography is a product, an interactive outcome, and nothing to do with observation by neutral or disembodied intellects' (Law, 1994: 17). Instead of that stable subject there is a 'logic of continuous transfer' that means that the 'vertical, univocally oriented node that bound the subject to the world is dissolved' and thus that the notion of the singular authorial presence becomes unstable (Polizzi, 2000: 251). Perhaps this leads to Michel Serres' reimagining of thinking and authorial presence.

Who am I then? A node of emission and reception, an open interchange, equipped with the pure possibility of a short circuit, that absorbs and redistributes, by bursts and eclipses, the continual tonality ... a structure of exchange, unthinkable without exchange We think then by interception, I think interception and by the random decision of intersubjectivity. Who else am I? A discontinuous virtuality of sorting, of selection in intersubjective thought (Serres in Polizzi, 2000: 251).

That sort of spatial imaginarity of circulating, translating, transforming knowledge may lead us to a new methodological acknowledgement of the complex links binding an entangled local and global, near and far, present and absent, material and immaterial, I and not I in our work. Perhaps qualitative geographers, with Laurier and Philo (quoting

Michael Joyce), may ‘wish to inhabit ... ‘aporetic space,’... something grounded in encounters great and small, as ‘the space of doubt, scepticism, and consideration which eventually yields *possibility* ... , valorisation, persistence, and meaning’” (Laurier and Philo, 2006: 360). Perhaps we might follow the film work of Trinh Minh-ha where she suggests that

The story never stops beginning or ending. ... Its (in)finity subverts every notion of completeness and its frame remains a non-totalizable one. The differences it brings about are differences not only in structure, in the play of structures and of surfaces, but also in timbre and in silence ... in the choice and mixing of utterances, the ethos, the tones, the paces, the cuts, the pauses. The story circulates like a gift; an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity. One that stays inexhaustible within its own limits. Its departures and arrivals. Its quietness. (1989: 1–2)

Such a focus upon placing stories not just in context, but setting the relations of contexts in motion, may ‘transform the topographical places into topological spaces that trace the ensemble of [people’s] spatializing practices,’ embracing ‘narrative trajectories ... marked by mobile, folding, and interpenetrating relations among people, nature, and the cultural matrix of which they are a part’ that do not so much ‘map spaces but create shifting storylines of linkages that do not crystallize into fixed form’ (Odin, 1997: 602). Perhaps all of that can help too to form an enlivening spatiality with which to think through, and to forward, qualitative geographies in the twenty-first century.

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