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The Philosophy and Politics of Quality in Qualitative Organizational Research

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Within this article, the authors outline the political and institutional structures that work to formulate operating norms that govern what is considered to be "acceptable" qualitative organizational research, and the quality indicators attached to foundational, quasi-foundational, and nonfoundational research orientations. They argue that encouraging a plurality of methods and representations will better position the field of organizational studies to address the most significant questions of our time. Located within this position, they call for a democratization of what counts in organizational research: a more considered and central space for nonhegemonic approaches to qualitative work. In so doing, they champion a moral-sacred epistemology that foregrounds ethical and moral concerns as underpinning both the purpose and the quality of the research.

Keywords: *qualitative research; research quality; nonfoundational research*

Within this article, we argue that considerations of quality in qualitative research cannot be divorced from the political, axiological, ontological, and epistemological orientations of the scholarship. As such, we contend that traditional and still dominant methods of assessing research quality, founded on a positivistic understanding of the social world, are inherently unsuited to producing the variety of scholarship necessary for a vital, dynamic organizational studies. Our position is framed within ongoing conversations as to the actual and desired orientation of organizational research (e.g., Bartunek, 2002; Clegg, 2002; *Global Forum*, 2006; Hinings & Greenwood, 2002; see also Burrell & Morgan, 1979) and the role of qualitative research designs within it (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a; Gephart, 2004). These debates have called for a reflection on, if not a (re)consideration of, the roles that organizations play in contemporary life and how the ways in which we design, operate, change, and study organizations inevitably work to advantage some members of society and disadvantage others (Hinings & Greenwood, 2002). Such challenges as to how we conduct research in, with, and on organizations strikes at the heart of the issue of 'quality research.'

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Against this backdrop, we advocate here for a democratization of what counts in organizational research with more considered, and central, space for what are, at least with regard to their current place in organization studies, nonhegemonic epistemologies. Thus, our primary purpose is not only to provide a detailed consideration of the links between assessments of quality and the epistemological positions that underpin the scholarship but also to further our understanding of the quality of qualitative research that does not adhere to the dominant norms of the field. In carrying out this mandate, we also fulfill a secondary objective, which is to expose the ways in which determinations of quality are inevitably shaped by the political and institutional contexts in which the research takes place.

In situating our assessment of research quality as inseparable from the ontological and epistemological foundations of the research project, we consider three different research orientations. First, we focus on the ways in which qualitative researchers have attempted to align themselves with the traditional, and ostensibly most legitimate, positivist and postpositivist[1] paradigms. Such work, referred to as *foundationalist* (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; House, 2005), is firmly located in what we contend to be an impossible quest to uncover some aspects of an objective reality and is reflective of entrenched business school traditions and training programs that most of us who study organizations have received. Indeed, recently in the *Academy of Management Journal* (*AMJ*), Gephart (2004) noted that a large proportion of the qualitative submissions to *AMJ* that he has reviewed have a positivist or postpositivist orientation. For such work, the major determinants of quality have comprised the traditional criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, objectivity, and generalizability. The determination of quality in such research designs, along with the reasons for the continued dominance of the foundationalist position, is considered in this article.

Quasi-foundationalist researchers offer a departure from a foundationalist search for an objective reality by instead advocating for a subtle or nonnaive neorealism that searches for an approximation of reality. This reframing proposes that, from a constructivist epistemology, there is no theory-free knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b; Smith & Deemer, 2000). Such work places an emphasis on the generation of generic theory that is empirically grounded and scientifically credible and produces findings that can be generalized to other contexts. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000b) acknowledged, such work is internally reflexive with the effects of the researcher and research strategy acknowledged.

Finally, moving further away from notions of realism, *nonfoundationalists* contend that there can be no theory-free knowledge and thus that relativism is inevitable. On the basis of a "moral-sacred epistemology" (Christians, 1997, 2000; Denzin, 2002a; Lincoln & Denzin, 2000) that foregrounds ethical and moral concerns as central to the purpose and the quality of such research, nonfoundationalists propose that there is no possibility of uncovering any neutral social facts; rather, they firmly hold that all knowledge is value laden. Nonfoundationalists thus contend that the quasifoundationalist approach is problematic given that there are no absolute truths—truths and values are relative to the context in, and the researcher by, which they are constructed. In this formulation, there can be no hypotheses to be tested, proven, disproven, or retested, as there are no objective facts to uncover. As Smith and Deemer (2000) have proposed,

> If falsification is a matter of disjuncture between a theory, or a hypothesis derived from a theory, and the facts, the latter must be independent of the former. This is precisely what is not possible if all observation is theory-laden. (p. 833)

Problematizing realism, nonfoundationalists thereby divorce quality from methodological rigor; quality is instead determined by the purpose and positioning of the research. From this perspective, issues of quality are inherently tied up in the underlying intent of the research, based on a "moral ethic" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b) and heavily influenced by the inevitable power and politics that accompany the research process (Smith & Hodkinson, 2005). Quality then becomes *internalized* within the underlying research philosophy rather than being something to be tested at the completion of the research or an outcome of the application of robust methods. This consideration of morality within the research process resonates with recent philosophical debates that argue for a shift of focus in organizational theory from understanding how to design ever more efficient and effective organizations to a concern with who controls organizations and the consequences of that control (Bartunek, 2002; Clegg, 2002; Hinings & Greenwood, 2002).

Although these concerns are of crucial importance for organizational research, what this means, methodologically, and how we judge research in such approaches has yet to be widely debated—save for a few, often muted, discussions at specialized conferences/streams, within corridors, during (some) graduate classes, and via cosseted e-mail exchanges. Indeed, such musings are an accurate depiction of the conversations and heated discussions that we (as authors) have had through our graduate and professional careers. As a result, this article slips, often uncomfortably, between the formal and the informal, the scholarly and the personal, the political and the detached. This reflects the differential stages of thinking that we, as authors, embody and is an attempt at reconciling our discussions with each other, colleagues, and graduate students over several years. In many ways, it reflects our own struggles to come to terms with our evolving philosophical positions that have been heavily influenced by the different disciplinary backgrounds (management and cultural studies), training (United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand), and professional experiences (United Kingdom and United States) that we have each experienced during our careers. This journey is further complicated by our frequent discussions that reveal that despite our different backgrounds and disciplinary homes, our philosophical positions (and indeed the research questions that we feel should be addressed) are often in concert but certainly not identical. Furthermore, our research programs have been influenced by pressures to publish (and not perish!) in disciplines that have not always been receptive to the epistemological positions with which we have at times been most comfortable. Finally, although we are shy to embrace categorization, one of us would most comfortably fit within a social constructivist epistemology geared toward understanding the lives of organization members, the other a cultural studies/critical theorist position that explicitly embodies a political agenda oriented toward social justice and taking sides on the most pressing social issues of our time (e.g., Denzin, 2002b; Giroux, 2001).

Our backgrounds have inevitably shaped the approaches that we take to our work, philosophically, methodologically, and presentationally. Indeed, the way in which we initially framed this article, despite our best intentions, was perhaps dominated by our concerns over what would "wash" in this journal. Thus, although we advocated for a

consideration of differential epistemological approaches to challenge, sit alongside (however uncomfortably), and stir debate against that which is hegemonic in organizational research (and consider how quality can be determined within these various approaches), we initially conformed to a dominant style of writing and presentation of ideas, thereby eschewing the political potential of the issues we were raising. We are thus grateful to the reviewers and editors of this special issue for encouraging us to write in a style more reflective of our epistemological positions. Such a process has allowed us to emphasize the insurgent nature of the debates, allowing us to raise what we felt may have been untenable positions for the field and giving us the opportunity to present what may appear as somewhat "out there" ideas that deserve critical reflection in organizational studies. Of course, we are sure that not all will agree; many may even dismiss our contribution outright, regarding many of the ideas expressed as too avant-garde or simply as not scholarship. Yet this is the very point for which we are arguing. Our call for a recognition and acceptance of alternative conceptions of research, and the quality of such work, is delivered with the desire for a field that constantly questions itself, its center, its established practices, its dominant worldviews: a field in constant flux and tension. This is a position that we feel can only speak to the health and vitality of organizational studies. We hope that this reflexive tone will help the reader understand where we are coming from and provide an insight into the nature of our deliberations concerning what, for us, constitutes quality in qualitative research.

The remainder of the article is structured to examine these issues and their impact on conceptualizations of quality in foundationalist, quasi-foundationalist, and nonfoundationalist research. In particular, much of the balance of the article goes beyond the more established foundational and quasi-foundational perspectives to focus on the challenges, questions, and concerns that are raised when reflecting on quality in nonfoundational qualitative research.

Foundationalism: Traditional Criteria

We first briefly consider the ways in which scholars engaged in traditional forms of qualitative research have attempted to demonstrate the quality of their work by adopting explicit and implicit positivist and postpositivist criteria, a position termed foundationalism (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; House, 2005). Here, quality is judged according to traditional criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, objectivity, and generalizability. Thus, often unwieldy and unstructured data are reduced, systematically elicited, standardized, and quantified in relation to predetermined categorizations through a range of techniques, ranging from, but not limited to, keywords in context analysis, componential analysis, taxonomies, word counts, frequencies, cognitive mapping, semantic analyses, and word matrices. Quotations from interviews or documents are usually very pithy and designed to support previously proposed hypotheses. To reinforce distance and supposed objectivity, computer software is frequently extolled as a mechanism for data reduction and analyses (Gephart, 2004), even though codes have been established by human decisions.

The resultant analytic induction seeks to uncover causal explanations of phenomena that are sufficiently robust to allow for broad comparison and subsequent generalization of

findings (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). These analyses are then positioned to define some aspect of an undeniable, independent relationship between knowable and operationalizable variables. The quality of the research is, in large part, dependent on the establishment of measures of reliability and validity with methodological triangulation regarded as a necessary component of reputable scholarship (Eisenhardt, 1989). This allows qualitative researchers to position their work as adhering to established standards and provides readily recognizable metrics for determining what constitutes high- and low-quality work.

A perusal of any of the major organizational studies/management journals, particularly those published in North America,[2] together with occasional commentaries such as those by Gephart (2004) and Denison (1996), illustrates that not only is qualitative research in general significantly underrepresented but those pieces of qualitative research that are published are predominantly foundational in orientation. If we are to understand how assessments of quality have become grounded in organization studies, then it is worth uncovering why it is that foundationalism, despite its widespread critique, retains such a firm hold on the field. What is apparent is that there are powerful institutional and political forces that operate at macro and micro levels to effectively constrain the use of alternative research approaches.

With the doctrines of logical positivism remaining entrenched, and dominant, within U.S. business schools, any ontological or epistemological position that may run counter to such a position is usually viewed with suspicion and, unfortunately, marginalized. Consequently, the training that most doctoral students receive, and in particular the orientation provided in most research design courses, results in the vast majority of students gaining an implicit and explicit understanding of, and comfort with, foundationalism. Thus, most business schools, already populated with faculty members who have well-established (foundational) beliefs of how to do research, are reinforced with new faculty members who have received very similar training programs. Not surprisingly, these views are reflected across (academic) editorial boards providing common broad-based perceptions of what counts as useful knowledge in the major journals. As a result, even much of the qualitative research that is published reflects the "normal science" paradigm (Kuhn, 1970) that has predominated—either because of the entrenched belief structures of the authors or because of a desire of those authors to present their work as adhering to the desired standards of scientific rigor. Such work is positioned in a value-neutral style with the author totally removed from the text. Three well-known, and often cited, studies well illustrate this approach. Van Maanen's (1988) realist example drawn from his work with the Union City police clearly lays out the scientific prose style absent any authorial voice in a quest for some supposedly neutral objectivity. Barley's (1986) investigation of technology and structuring in two radiology departments is also representative of this classic scientific approach. Data collected during highly structured periods of observation, interviews, and documents are reduced and presented using frequency counts and regression analysis, with those quotes that are used pared down to very small illustrative snippets that support the depicted reality. Eisenhardt and Bourgeois's (1988) assessment of the ways in which politics affected decision making in eight micro-computer firms is similarly oriented, using a series of carefully ordered short quotations supplemented with quantitative data to test a set of realist propositions. Denison's (1996) comments, although directed specifically at culture researchers, do, we suggest, resonate well with other facets

of organizational research: "[Qualitative] culture research is now being published in the leading organizational journals, but (ironically) only by emulating the same positivist research model that culture researchers originally deplored" (p. 644).

The adoption of a foundational approach to qualitative research is further reinforced by the reliance on similar guiding texts that are written from a foundational perspective. For example, Eisenhardt's (1989) widely cited article on building theory from case study research is written from a self-proclaimed position that "adopts a positivist view of research" (p. 546). A similar orientation is found in Yin's (1984, 1994, 2003) texts on how to build and use case studies, also prominent among those who carry out qualitative (case study) research. Although inclusive of a variety of approaches to, and rationales for, building cases, Yin (1994) placed a heavy emphasis on hypotheses testing, the use of "multiple sources of evidence, that . . . converg[e] on the same set of facts or findings" (p. 78; see also Yin, 2003, p. 83), and the avoidance of researcher bias through the use of strategies such as using multiple reviewers to confirm interpretations. Yin (1994, 2003) did, very briefly, acknowledge alternative modes, such as Van Maanen's (1988) critical and confessional tales, and the need in "good" case study research to search for competing explanations; however, the general thrust of his work is foundational. Even Seale's (1999) somewhat less well known but quite influential *The Quality of Qualitative Research* is written by a self-proclaimed postpositivist who maintains "a qualified commitment to a broadly realist position" (p. 147). Thus, even though Seale promotes the use of techniques drawn from other philosophical viewpoints, questions claims about universal truths, espouses the search for evidence within a fallibilistic framework, and cites an openness to the ongoing quest for new data and interpretations, such methods are followed with the intent of revealing ever more accurate versions of reality. Seale's position is that "replication and convergence on a *single true version* [italics added] are feasible—in theory" (p. 145); any lack of such convergence is due to practical or methodological constraints.

Perhaps the most widely cited qualitative text used by organizational theorists is Miles and Huberman's (1984, 1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Interestingly, Miles and Huberman (1994) shifted from an ardently realist foundational position in the first edition of *Qualitative Data Analysis* to being "dubious about post-positivist canons" in the second edition and arguing that "'realism' has come to mean many things to many people" (p. 4). Thus, although we can see a foundation of logical positivism in much of the second edition, it also appears that Miles and Huberman (1994) are striving to reach a more quasi-foundational position. Indeed, as we reflect on the nature of qualitative research, and determinants of quality, it is not surprising to ascertain that positions evolve over time, both in terms of individuals and broader theoretical approaches. Seale (1999), for example, although a self-professed realist, also argued that it is quite appropriate, and even beneficial, to borrow from different epistemological positions. Similarly, Seale clearly positions himself as quite moderate and appears very much in sympathy with the quasi-foundational position, despite the overall orientation of his text. In fact, we have produced qualitative work, both individually and together, that could variously be classified as quasi-foundational and nonfoundational, and we have reflected, at different junctures, on the value, utility, and contributions of these differential forms of scholarship.[3]

Although all of the texts cited above have utility (indeed, we have drawn on aspects of several in our own work), they have also acted to reify a view of what high-quality

qualitative research in organization studies looks like, a view that has largely gone unchallenged or even debated. By contrast, texts such as Denzin and Lincoln's (1994a, 2000a, 2005c) or Truman, Mertens, and Humphries's (2000) edited collections that present alternative modes of thought (e.g., nonfoundational) are rarely cited in the organizational studies literature despite their wide usage in fields such as education, sociology, and cultural studies.

The above factors have worked within the academic setting to help form and entrench foundational norms with respect to qualitative research. However, at a macro-political level, other forces have also lent weight to this conceptualization of high-quality qualitative research. As government-sponsored funding for research in U.S. and U.K. higher education settings has significantly dropped in recent years, so the pressure on faculty to secure such funding has increased. However, along with this has come political, ideological, and paradigmatic retrenchment that has created a hostile environment to research that fails to adopt what are often seen as mandated methods, most notably the gold standard, evidence-based randomized trials (see, e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, on the National Research Council; House, 2005, and Smith & Hodkinson, 2005, on educational research in the United States and the United Kingdom). As two anonymous reviewers of our article pointed out, the Research Assessment Exercise in the United Kingdom has also had the unfortunate effect of allowing the lure of government funding—allied, of course, to the threat of its allocation to others—to shape individuals' research priorities (the U.S. tenure system and the advanced corporatization of the university [see Giroux, 2003], has fulfilled a similar role of reducing the likelihood of nonstandard research approaches). This, of course, creates a difficult tension that inevitably affects how quality is determined, who determines it, and how we engage in the research process. Although we cannot offer a simple resolution to this issue, the implications of both overt and covert political behavior on our research activities and designs must be acknowledged if they are to be challenged by those of us who hold competing positions.

Clearly the macro and micro forces outlined above have helped to establish widely adopted beliefs and norms regarding how high-quality qualitative research should look. Unfortunately, in striving for the distance and neutral objectivity called for in such manifestations of qualitative work, we are confronted with two issues that, in our view, act to fundamentally flaw the foundationalist approach. First, by adopting traditional positivistic and postpositivistic standards by which to "measure" the quality of qualitative research in organization studies, we become more concerned with demonstrating the reliability, validity, and generalizability of our work than questioning the actual purpose behind it. Such work simply continues a quest for ever more efficient organizational operations and in the process—and this is a major point of Hinings and Greenwood (2002) and their discussants Bartunek (2002) and Clegg (2002)—it all too often ignores the most pressing social problems of our time, producing a politics that offers nothing but more of the same (see also Giroux, 2001). This effectively blinkers the field in its ability and potential to provide a critical examination of the operations and machinations of organizations within society, surely a responsibility of an informed and engaged group of organizational scholars. In our opinion, foundational research blinds us to important questions with regard to what the field stands for, who it stands for, in whose interests research takes place (the researcher, the researched, private interests, the public good), and what alternatives exist. It suppresses voices that question if organizational research is an exciting, vibrant,

and politically charged academic discipline that provides strategies of understanding, engagement, and transformation that address the most demanding social problems of our time. Indeed, within a foundational approach, how often do we place the study of organizations in the context of its wider political, economic, and ideological relationships? Are we concerned with exposing patterns of inequality and intervening in local communities? Are we actively exploring and accounting for ongoing environmental degradation by for-profit organizations? Are we examining, on a global scale, the role of organizations in protecting and enhancing human rights, labor rights, and the environment, as called for by United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson (2002) and reiterated at the recent Global Forum (2006)? Drawing on Said (1994), are we intellectuals with a vocation that is "publicly recognizable and involves both commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability" in a field that fosters "a spirit in opposition, rather than in accommodation" in which the "the challenge of intellectual life is to be found in dissent against the status quo" and in which intellectuals "cannot be mistaken for an anonymous functionary or careful bureaucrat"?

Second, although these questions are clearly important in and of themselves, there is also a technical issue with respect to quality that concerns our ability to adequately capture and subsequently express the external reality that foundationalists aim to uncover. In recognition of this, quasi-foundationalists have turned away from an objective of definitively uncovering a single reality to an acknowledgment of the importance of reflexivity and an acceptance that there can be no theory-free understanding of the extant world.

Quasi-foundationalism: Neorealist Criteria

As we have discussed, the foundationalist approach to qualitative research and its epistemological underpinnings of positivism and postpositivism appear understandably predominant among qualitative management researchers. Consequently, the foundational concepts of validity, reliability, and generalizability, along with the methodological cornerstone of triangulation, retain a strong valence when considerations of quality are undertaken. However, these very concepts have been brought into question with the so-called dual "crises of representation and legitimation" (see Denzin & Lincoln, 1994b). These crises refer to the perceived difficulties that researchers have in adequately capturing and portraying the experience of the researched "other" and also in separating themselves from the research to allow for the adoption of a neutral, unbiased position.[4] Explicit here is that the lived experiences of those researched are created in the actual text written by the researcher and that facts have to be interpreted within a wider framework of beliefs, not just based on pure observation (House, 2005).

The quality of qualitative research for quasi-foundationalists depends on the application of appropriate methods. This approach is seen as a route to overcoming the acknowledged inherent biases of the researcher and is thus seen as crucial both in uncovering an approximation of reality and in determining research quality (Smith & Hodkinson, 2005). Such work often places an emphasis on the development of understanding and theory that is empirically grounded and scientifically credible and that produces findings that can be generalized to other contexts (see, e.g., Hammersley, 1990). As Denzin and Lincoln

(2005b) explained, such work is internally reflexive with the impacts of the researcher and research strategy acknowledged. During analysis, the quasi-foundational researcher makes judgments about the meanings of contiguous blocks of text and subsequently offers visual displays or selects key quotes as exemplars in an effort to lead the reader to quickly understand what it has taken the researcher a much longer period to determine. Thus, quasi-foundational research is often presented as reflective and self-conscious, providing insights into the ongoing struggles related to authorship, truth, validity, reliability, and even some of the complex political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing (Richardson, 2000a). There are a number of considerations to be taken into account in this respect—how credible, trustworthy, or faithful the text is to the setting, the issue of reflexivity, and that of a connection between the final text and the world written about. An emphasis is placed on the quest to describe and understand the often divergent meanings proffered by organizational members and their underlying meanings for the interpretation of social interaction (Gephart, 2004). At the very least, the qualitative researcher attempts to be fair, balanced, and conscientious in taking account of multiple perspectives, interests, and realities that will exist within any social setting.

Within such work, there are a number of formal ways in which the researcher addresses quality with respect to the canons of validity and reliability during the research process. First, researchers often engage in peer debriefing. This process involves "exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Such a process allows another suitably qualified person, usually an informed colleague not involved in the research project, to explore the inquirer's biases, to clarify interpretations, and to generally play "devil's advocate" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Second, transcripts, field notes, and interpretations can be periodically returned to those in the field to allow participants to check facts and logic and to see if the account "rings true" (Hanson & Newburg, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In sum, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is incumbent upon the researcher to establish the trustworthiness of the research by demonstrating that his or her work has *credibility* (e.g., through prolonged engagement with the field, member checking, and triangulation), *transferability* (provision of sufficient detail in accounts to allow readers to appreciate if insights can be transferred to other settings), *dependability* (creating an audit trail by documenting methods used and the logic behind results and conclusions drawn), and *confirmability* (e.g., providing a reflexive, self-critical account that exposes inherent biases in the work, and triangulation). Effectively, these are quasi-foundational surrogates for establishing the quality of the scholarship.

There have been other attempts to standardize quasi-foundational quality criteria. For example, Ritchie and Spencer (1994) developed Framework as a tool for analyzing unstructured qualitative data—a highly mechanical approach that directs and draws on the creative and conceptual ability of the analyst to determine the meaning, salience, and connecting logic of emerging themes. Seale (1999) went even further, reproducing reviewer guidelines established by the British Sociological Association Medical Sociology Group that are intended to formalize criteria for the evaluation of the quality of qualitative research. Both approaches are typical of the quasi-foundational approach—a desire to combine recognition of the problems inherent in the foundational approach with a

perceived need to retain rigorous, standardized criteria by which high-quality qualitative research can be produced and externally verified.

The quasi-foundationalist position thus rejects the idea that qualitative research is, or can be, carried out in some autonomous realm that is insulated from the wider society and from the particular biography, pathways, decisions, and theoretical orientations of the researcher. In this way, social processes and personal characteristics will influence the data and write-up of the work (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). As such, the researcher is reflexive; acknowledges the impact that he or she may have had on the world under investigation, perhaps through a role or rapport with participants or the decisions made during observations; and provides details of personal characteristics, such as ethnic origin, age, gender, and sexuality that may have influenced data collection and analyses. Within this approach, quality becomes bound with credibility: convincing the audience that every effort has been made to legitimately represent the research setting.

The crises of representation and legitimation force us to consider the traditional criteria used to evaluate qualitative research: a serious rethinking of terms such as *validity*, *generalizability*, and *reliability*. As a result, good-quality research can claim to have secured a credible approximation of a version of reality producing a reasonably compelling understanding of human conduct and experience that contributes toward an acceptable, general, and cumulative knowledge concerning organizations and their actors (Snow & Morrill 1993). More conscientious researchers will position themselves explicitly in the work by writing in the first person and thus reinforcing that despite their best efforts to convey a fair and balanced account, the work still constitutes an *interpretation* of a set of events, not a definitive truth. Thus, there is an explicit recognition that multiple realities can exist, that trustworthiness in the research process is always negotiable, and that truth cannot be definitively proclaimed. An excellent example of quasi-foundational research is provided by Corley's (2004) and Corley and Gioia's (2004) work on identity change in a corporate spin-off. In particular, the use of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four key criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are used to convince the reader of the robustness—and hence quality—of the research. Furthermore, the first-person writing style clearly positions the authors as the decision makers within the analytic process and the conduit through which interpretations of the data were made.

For Smith and Deemer (2000) and Guba and Lincoln (2005), there remains a problem with the quasi-foundationalist effort to secure any form of approximate reality given that all observation is theory laden; the active construction and co-creation of such knowledge by human agents is thus produced by human consciousness. Consequently, a cornerstone of foundationalism and quasi-foundationalism, triangulation, becomes inherently problematic because of the assumption that there is a fixed point or object that can be triangulated (Richardson, 2000a, 2000b). As opposed to the triangle, Richardson (2000a, 2000b) proposed the crystal. The metaphor of the crystal combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach and thus opens the door to a variety of ways of seeing "reality." As Richardson (2000b) suggested, "What we see depends on our angle of repose. . . . We know more and doubt what we know. Ingeniously we know there is always more to know" (p. 934). This less solid, floating, refracted view of qualitative research reinforces the importance of acknowledging that however conscientious the scholar is in following quality control

mechanisms, the resultant account is still an interpretation of a series of events that is inevitably partial and written from a particular perspective. This renders problematic any attempt to base quality purely on the rigor of the methods followed. Thus, the position of quasi-foundationalism is viewed by some as being as untenable as foundationalism leading to nonfoundationalism being offered as a more compelling and persuasive way with which to engage the empirical. Inevitably, this has profound implications for considerations of research quality.

Nonfoundationalism: Free-Floating Quality

If our understanding of quality in qualitative organizational research is at a nascent state generally, then this is particularly the case with work that adheres to a nonfoundational perspective. Here, the position that all observation is inevitably theory laden places us in a position without external referent points against which to compare either the standards of research design and execution or, of course, any data. Under such conditions, questions of quality must be reframed. Quality becomes part of the essence of the research design; it becomes *internalized* within the underlying research philosophy and orientation rather than being something to be "tested" at the completion (foundationalism) or during (quasi-foundationalism) the research.

Central to this discussion of quality is the question of how we can understand human conduct and experience. We contend that although understanding organizational contexts and actors therein is important and that advances and knowledge gained from such research should not be discarded, approaches to organizational studies as a somewhat more liberationally, if not revolutionary, oriented practice capable of changing problematic situations (Denzin, 2002b; Flaherty, 2002; Gephart, 2004; Hinings & Greenwood, 2002) should be part of the armory of the field. Such considerations strike at the axiological position of the researcher—the values and beliefs that guide the researcher through the choice of research problems to be addressed, and the paradigms, theories, and methods that will be employed—that in concert with epistemological and ontological concerns must, we contend, be considered when assessing research quality.

Thus, as opposed to foregrounding that which the researcher finds virtuous, a central concern with the moral order, ethics, and values in everyday life becomes of import (Christians, 2000). It is an epistemological approach that stresses interaction and dialogical methodologies, an emancipatory research agenda that takes the sides of the marginalized and oppressed (Humphries, Mertons, & Truman, 2000). Based in the works of Paulo Freire (e.g., 1972), this is an epistemological position that advocates helping people to recognize the ideologies—myths, values, languages—that reinforce the status quo and allow for the exercise of power by some over others (Humphries et al., 2000; Truman et al., 2000). This is a nonfoundational organizational study that is grounded in a 'moral-sacred epistemology' that values human life without exception; is political; and stresses a feminist, communitarian moral ethic centered on empowerment, human dignity, nonviolence, shared governance, solidarity, and civic transformation (Christians, 1997; Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). This constitutes a choice for those in the organizational field: to remain detached and thereby "serve only those with the means, the social designation, to remain detached" (Lincoln &

Denzin, 2000, p. 1062) or to acknowledge, and indeed laud, a space for those outside these dominant margins who embrace epistemologies "scarcely dreamed of a generation ago."

Given that embracing a 'moral-sacred' epistemology in organizational studies is a radical departure from established standards for assessing quality, it is pertinent to examine how quality is determined within the nonfoundational approach. Here, criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative research must be based upon an holistic appreciation of the scholarship, notably the moral and ethical concerns that work to erase any distinction between epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics. Judging work according to some moral or ethical criteria is, of course, subjective. Although this will be problematic for some, we hold that such considerations open up possibilities for the field of organization studies in terms of the research questions posed, methodologies deployed, and mechanisms of presentation used. Adhering to a moral-sacred epistemology certainly does not proffer an environment in which anything goes. We can, and must, make judgments pertaining to criteria of evaluation. Similarly, we do not need to do away with categorization, something that is impossible for the human mind, but we must consider the moral, social, and political consequences for constructing such categories—in other words, judgments about the goodness or badness of research in this sense must be based within a moral-sacred epistemology.

Guba and Lincoln (2005) suggested that "foundational criteria are discovered; nonfoundational criteria are negotiated" (p. 203), often with those in the community within which organizational researchers find themselves. As an example of such an approach, Harrison, MacGibbon, and Morton (2001) proposed criteria of reciprocity that take us beyond a desire and need for more and better data toward an ethical position that advances emancipatory theory and empowers the researched. In this sense, trustworthiness surpasses validity, credibility, and believability, but not just in regard to assessment by the academy. Rather, trustworthiness is bound with reciprocity and a concern with how research is perceived by the community and by research participants. Of course, demand for credible and believable findings still exist, but they do so alongside new requirements of research to serve the interests of those who are researched and for the researched to have more of a say at as many points of the project as is possible, difficult as that can be (Frisby, Reid, Millar, & Hoeber, 2005; Harrison et al., 2001).

We can consider the moral-sacred epistemological approach to nonfoundational organizational research in two nonmutually exclusive ways. The first of these, very much in keeping with the tenor of the ideas expressed by Hinings and Greenwood (2002), concerns the nature of the questions being addressed and particularly the viewpoint that high-quality research is that which addresses the key social problems[5] of our time (Christians, 2000; Denzin, 2002b; Giroux, 2001). The second concerns our moral responsibility toward those whose lives we touch in the research process and particularly how we can represent those lived experiences in a credible and trustworthy manner. We now explore each of these points in turn, although, of course, the division is artificial and made solely to help clarify the issues at hand.

Quality and Advocacy

If we adopt the position that meaningful qualitative research is that which in some way addresses the social ills of the world around us, then quality becomes bound with an ethic of

personal and community responsibility (Collins, 1991) that empowers those disadvantaged in, and by, organizations. Quality is reframed in a manner that is encompassed within social criticism, engendering resistance and helping persons to imagine how things could be different (Denzin, 2002a; Truman et al., 2000). Given that it is personally and contextually situated, understanding how this ethic works in any specific situation cannot be given in advance. In this formulation, good quality organizational research becomes entrenched within a moral-sacred epistemology; a contextualized civic, collaborative project committed to community development; a project that joins the researcher with the researched in an ongoing moral dialogue (Christians, 2000; Denzin, 2002a).

This is research that "takes sides" (Denzin, 2002b) as researchers align themselves with particular groups, categories, or actors in such a way as to serve varying interests. Such explicit demonstrations of partisanship have permeated social research for at least 40 years: Feminist researchers have explicitly pronounced their goal as the emancipation of women, antiracist researchers are committed to the struggle against White racism, and disability researchers formulate their goal as empowering the disabled to emancipate themselves from the conditions imposed on them by an able-bodied society (Hammersley, 2000). Indeed, as Hammersley (2000) explained, partisanship in research is not limited to such explicitly political forms—there are frequent calls for social research in various fields to serve the needs of the professionals who serve them (e.g., education, health care, professional service firms).

Such partisanship suggests that the death knell of value-neutral research has sounded (and we doubt that many, even foundationalist scholars, really believe in the sanctity of positivism). Indeed, in a landmark article in the journal *Social Problems* in 1967, Howard Becker proposed that all sociologists are inevitably partisan, that there could be no objective viewpoints, and that sociologists should explicitly pronounce "whose side we are on" (p. 239). Becker's work on deviant behavior, for example, sided with those in a subordinate position, and his work retains a residual popularity given that his call to take sides resonates with the epistemological and political radicalism of critical approaches and of postmodernism (Hammersley, 2000). Yet as Hammersley (2000) pointed out, this romantic attachment to Becker's argument is based on a "radical" interpretation. Becker holds that political positions should *emerge* from findings that in turn emanate from the application of robust scientific methods and quality criteria that, in fact, resonate with the foundational approach. Thus, Becker's "political radicalism ... is a *by-product* [italics added] of a sound scientific approach" (Hammersley, 2000, p. 80). The emphasis on scientific method with political considerations clearly secondary is at odds with an advocacy position that *centralizes* and *internalizes* the moral, ethical, and political value of qualitative scholarship at the outset as the very raison d'être for the research itself. Thus, although we can agree with Becker that scholars will hold inherently biased positions, we clearly differ with how we arrive at that position: A moral-sacred epistemology provides the basis for research designed explicitly to enable social criticism and engender resistance (Denzin, 2002b).

Denzin's (2000) work presents a useful exemplar of how quality is infused within, and integral to, the design of the research process. Denzin works back and forth between three interpretive practices: civic, intimate, and literary journalism; critical, performance-based ethnographies; and variations on a Chicano/a and African American aesthetic and the relation between these practices and critical race theory (CRT). This involves presenting

in-depth, intimate stories of problematic everyday life, lived up close, offering stories that create moral compassion and help citizens make intelligent decisions and take public action on private troubles. It offers a civic discourse; presents the writer as deeply knowledgeable about the local community; and exposes complacency, bigotry, and wishful thinking. The quality of such work can be judged according to a number of criteria: accuracy; nonmaleficence; the right to know; making one's moral position public; demonstration of "interpretive sufficiency" (depth, detail, emotion, nuance, coherence, and representational adequacy); and freedom from racial, class, and gender stereotyping. For example, Denzin (2002b) characterized high quality research by its ability to decloak the seemingly race-neutral and color-blind ways of administrative policy, political discourse, and organizational structures and experiences.

Some of these issues are implicitly covered by Hinings and Greenwood's (2002) call for a shift in the focus of organizational theory scholars from a relentless pursuit of how to design ever more efficient and effective organizations to a concern with who controls organizations and the consequences of that control. By bringing organizational (and other) actors explicitly into the design of the research, including fundamental decisions such as what issues to address and how, a nonfoundationalist approach can point to a revised consideration of what constitutes meaningful research. Frisby et al. (2005) have provided a valuable account of the epistemological, ethical, and practical considerations involved in bringing research participants actively into the research process. Focused on capturing the "lived experiences" of a group of marginalized, low-income women during a 3-year period, Frisby and her colleagues discuss the possibilities and difficulties of a nonfoundational approach to organizational research. The emancipatory potential for such work is clear in the research of Frisby and her colleagues and elaborated in greater detail by Lather (1991). However, doing such collaborative work is not straightforward. Frisby et al., for example, provide an extremely useful reflection on such difficulties, and mechanisms for trying to deal with them, in an organizational studies setting. These authors muse on using appropriate language; agreeing on decision-making protocols, writing formats, and authorship rights; deciding who to give voice to and who to silence; and addressing the power differentials inherent in all research. Although the utility of such research is apparent, these considerations can make doing participatory research quite challenging.

As is apparent in the work of Lather (1991) and Frisby et al. (2005), and also Ashcraft (2001), traditional objectivist demands of a detached researcher documenting the world of the *other* are dismissed as researchers become increasingly answerable to their communities of origin and to their communities of interest (hooks, 1984). Quality thus becomes relational (Lincoln, 1995), emanating from an intense sharing, which in turn opens up all parties to all elements of the inquiry.

The approaches described above involve coparticipation, bringing the audience into the text; creating shared emotional experience; stressing political action; taking sides; moving people to reflect and even act; offering the presentational (alongside or as an alternative representational) form; and building collaborative, reciprocal, trusting, friendly relations with those studied. In this sense, we need to adjust our research metaphors, from "discovery and finding" to "constructing and making" (Smith & Hodkinson, 2005). Such an approach clearly opens organizational research to previously taboo topics and indeed actively calls on us to search for opportunities that speak to marginalized populations—women and children;

Black; White; Chicano/a; Asian American; Native American; straight; gay; the poor; and persons who suffer from violence, racism, and sexism (Denzin, 2000).

Quality and (Re)presentation

In addition to considerations of purpose, the nonfoundationalist position that there can be no theory-free knowledge and that relativism is consequently inevitable also has profound implications for judging the (re)presentation of qualitative work. As opposed to efforts to discover reality, the metaphysics of relativism assumes that there are multiple realities and that understanding is created by the combined efforts of the researcher, those being studied, and indeed the interpretations of the reader. Furthermore, a moral-sacred epistemology involves collectively deciding on relevant research questions (e.g., with organizational actors), jointly determining appropriate data collection methods, and collaboratively analyzing and communicating the results (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000b; Frisby et al., 2005; Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993; Reid, 2000; Ristock & Pennell, 1996).

Nonfoundationalist scholars explicitly recognize the power imbalances inherent in the research process. Terms such as *researcher* and *research subject*, or the slightly less charged but still inherently hierarchical *interviewer* and *interviewee*, very clearly portray where power lies in the research process, who determines what is and what is not important, how modes of inquiry should be structured, and who should and should not be given voice. The type of work produced through such a lens may well disrupt the ways in which qualitative research in organizational studies has traditionally been reported. Indeed, as Rouse and Daellenbach (1999) have pointed out, changing our investigative and theoretical perspectives may necessitate a new tolerance for alternative forms of reporting.

A central concern within such expression is the inclusion of multiple voices of those being represented and a rejection of the authoritative, realist, and objectivist style of writing ethnography (James, Hockey, & Dawson, 1997). A landmark for this line of thinking was the publication of Clifford and Marcus's (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, a text that emphasized the "literary" turn in the expression of qualitative research. This publication highlighted the ways in which ethnographic representations, especially in anthropology, had fundamentally been the products of asymmetrical power relations and led to several different ways of describing, inscribing, interpreting, and (re)presenting data (Denzin, 2000). Responses to this led to a realization that ontological, epistemological, and methodological advances must be accompanied by similar advances in expression. Reflecting the comments of Gephart (2004), "Many of us do ethnography but write in the conservative voice of science. . . . In short, we often render our research reports devoid of human emotion and self-reflection. As ethnographers we experience life but write science" (Krizek, 1998, p. 93).

Literary, or performative, constructions, however, attempt to remove the false distinction between science and rhetoric, thus reaffirming the essential dialectic between the aesthetic and humanist, on one hand, and the logical and scientific, on the other (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Although this has spawned experimentation with alternative ways of representation, such as ethnography as drama, fiction, or poetry (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b; Lather, 1991; Van Maanen, 1988), as we note above, there is often great pressure to adhere to the accepted norms of the field. Despite these concerns, and indeed, given Clegg's

(2002) call to tell stories that matter, it does seem as if there is a need to provide organizational scholarship that goes beyond benefiting a handful of other scholars—this may well involve the creation of texts and other forms of expression that are accessible and distinct from the style of science.

The development, and potential, of such nontraditional presentations is well exemplified by Richardson's (1993) explicit challenge to the prose style endemic in social science writing and its consequent emphases on exposing the truth. Richardson (1993) presented an account of a poem that she wrote about an unmarried mother, Louisa May; the presentation of the poem at the 1990 meetings of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (SSSI); and a subsequent scripted "ethnographic presentation" made at SSSI in 1992 that reproduced the discussion that followed the original presentation. Richardson (1993) chose to transform a 36-page interview transcript into a 5-page poem in which she sought to be "faithful to [her] sociological understanding of Louisa May's story of her life" (p. 696). Thus, rather than adopt a standard prose account intended to provide an authoritative, dispassionate, incontrovertible account of Louisa May's life, Richardson (1993) explicitly challenges the authenticity/validity of such description by crafting an overtly emotion-inducing, rich, and colorful piece of poetry.

Although she uses only Louisa May's words and phrases (and indeed in the 1990 SSSI presentation effected Louisa May's accent), Richardson (1993) is clearly making decisions as to how to present those words, which words to omit, and which parts to give particular emphasis. She does so, however, to stir within the reader the vivid emotion and nuanced understanding, albeit overlaid with Richardson's own training and experiences, which Richardson herself felt in conducting the research. In particular, she wanted the reader to experience Louisa May and also wanted to provide Louisa May with a space for authentic expression. This, along with the subsequent analysis and re-presentation of her own presentation experiences, is intended to provide an honesty and integrity to the construction of the account that is deemed lacking in traditional prose. In her own words, Richardson (1993)

> blurs genres, probes lived experience, enacts science, creates a female imaginary, breaks down dualisms, inscribes emotional labor and emotional response as valid, deconstructs the myth of an emotion-free social science, and makes a space for partiality, self-reflexivity, tension and difference. (p. 695)

Of course, adopting a different genre does not in and of itself ensure a better product. Somewhat reworking Richardson (2000b), we should be sensitized to issues surrounding authority, granting voice, authorship, social privilege, personal biography, narcissism, and the audience for which we are writing. Indeed, just as with traditional forms, criteria for judging the quality of newer forms of representation are beginning to emerge.

Richardson (2000a, 2000b) proposes that in addition to being held to academic, moral, and ethical criteria, such representations need to be held to additional standards. It is perhaps worth pointing out at this point that such narratives are not an easier proposition; rather, they may well be held to even more rigorous standards than their more traditional counterparts. Thus, in addition to whether the work makes a substantive contribution to understanding social life and to advancing academic knowledge, Richardson (2000b; see also Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) suggested holding work to "aesthetic criteria" that

open up the text; invite interpretive responses; and consider how complex, artistically shaped, and satisfying the text is; "reflexive criteria" that are cognizant of an epistemology that embraces the subjectivity and self-awareness of the author and that hold the author accountable; and "impact criteria" that ask if the text affects the reader emotionally and intellectually, generates new questions, and moves the reader to action. These are criteria focused on the embodiment of a sense of lived experience. Crucially, the onus is on the author to demonstrate to the reader how he or she knows what he or she claims to know.

Poetry, of course, is not the only nonconventional form of expression that scholars have experimented with in attempts to reproduce authentic lived experiences. Autoethnography (see, e.g., Bruni's [2006] account of the enactment and performance of heterosexuality in organizational environments), visual display (see Cohen, Hancock, & Tyler, 2006, on the power of art and photography to reveal that which is excluded from traditional forms of organizational research), and blurred genre works (e.g., Silk's [in press] exposure of racial inequalities within a community-based soccer organization) are other approaches that have been used to extend our organizational understanding. Still others have opted to provide almost article-length interview transcripts that are intended to provide the uncontaminated voice of the participant (e.g., Wacquant, 1998). Although we welcome such textual experimentation and see opportunities within organization studies for a wide variety of expression, we agree with Seale's (1999) contention that the author's voice *is* important. We cannot hide from the fact that as researchers we are obliged to make decisions as to what to include and exclude (even if we use the whole transcript, we have still decided *who* to interview), and nor should we avoid analyzing data and providing an interpretation of what is happening and why, faithful, drawing on Richardson (1993), to our own sociological and organizational understandings.

The shift from metaphors of discovery to those of construction and the realization that nonfoundationalist qualitative inquiry is based in a moral-sacred epistemology mean that quality criteria must be thought of not as abstract standards but rather as open-ended, socially constructed lists of characteristics (Smith & Hodkinson, 2005) that cannot necessarily be guaranteed in advance. If, for example, nonfoundational research is judged according to foundational criteria, it will be (and has been!) immediately dismissed as incapable of making a useful contribution to our understanding of organizations. Consider, for example, this response by "Male-2" to Richardson's poem at the 1990 SSSI meetings (Richardson, 1993; comments are reproduced from Male-2's responses in an audience discussion after the poem had been read):

> What about the reliability and credibility of the original experience? You have collapsed three moments of doing research into one. Because of what you have done, we cannot accept your findings as an accurate story. . . . I want to see your poem and the transcripts and reconcile the two. . . . What is the truth here? How do we know that you haven't made the whole thing up? . . . People are losing their MINDS!!! We must make a distinction between her life and her speech. These are methodological and technical issues. The interview was obviously flawed. There is no reliability or validity here. (pp. 699-701)

It is not hard to imagine the reaction that Male-2 would have as a reviewer required to provide an editorial recommendation on a nonfoundational qualitative project!

That such approaches decenter traditional forms of validity is without question. Indeed, validity becomes transgressive, partial, and endlessly deferred (Richardson, 1993, 2000a, 2000b). Thus, in investigating questions of the *consequences of control*, the author may lose authorial control, authority, and privilege with the text becoming messier, questioning, open, and tentative; it is not, however, inherently of poor quality.

Locating Nonfoundational Research

Situated squarely within the moral dimension of organizational research (e.g., Giroux, 2001; Smith & Hodkinson, 2005), nonfoundational qualitative organizational research can serve as an important site for critical conversations about decision making; strategy development; cultural politics; and the establishment of a multiracial, economic, and political democracy. Rather than accepting a neutral, value-free context, such work is positioned to address the role of organizations in the imperatives of consumption; the dynamics of the marketplace; the defining of commercial space; the sweeping reach of neoliberal ideology, power, and influence; the production of knowledge and national identities; and the complexities of globalization, freedom, and community (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000b; Giroux, 2001; Hinings & Greenwood, 2002). Ashcraft's (2001) study of SAFE is one example of nonfoundational work that addresses such issues. Using a critical feminist design to examine power in the context of a challenge to traditional (male) connotations of organization, Ashcraft plots the development of a form of organized dissonance that becomes reflected in the establishment of a "female bureaucracy." Similarly, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) provide two qualitative exemplars and a broad analytical discussion that illustrate the ways in which critical theory can open up a "space for micro-emancipation" in the context of challenges to individual identity within organizations.

In ending any attempt to determine quality based on some methodological or *post hoc* criteria, judgments about the worth of a project become played out in a social context and intertwined with the exercise of power and utilization of political behavior. Without neutral and objective criteria to draw on, and with the researcher firmly located within the research process, judgments of quality result from complex social interactions with the utilization of power and politics almost inevitable (Smith & Hodkinson, 2005).

The use of power and political behavior has, of course, always been a feature of the research process at both the micro (e.g., personal recommendation or imitation) and macro (e.g., external governing institutions) levels. Given their inevitability, openly acknowledging the place of power and politics in the research process is clearly preferable to hiding behind some supposedly neutral objectivity of a higher authority. However, what is important is how the political process operates, how power is exercised, and the effects that uncodified operating standards and norms have as they become institutionalized. Such issues become thrown into particularly sharp relief when challenges to traditional normalcy appear, as is the case with the emergence of alternatives to traditional foundational scholarship.

These are indeed hefty considerations for organizational research, considerations that point us toward change; toward ruptures in objective, apolitical, detached stances; toward those who are affected by organizations, the cultures within organizations; the moral,

political, and ethical dimensions of organizations; and indeed, our responsibilities as academics (Bartunek, 2002; Clegg, 2002; Hinings & Greenwood, 2002). Given the previously mentioned macro and micro pressures inherent within academe that push such work to the margins, nonfoundational work can be challenging. Within an institutional structure that has entrenched disciplinary and epistemological boundaries that are difficult and dangerous to cross, we are sensitive that many may not be in a position to occupy such a potentially (politically) controversial position (Kincheloe, 2001; Lincoln, 2004). This is likely to be particularly the case for younger researchers looking to establish themselves by generating publications, securing grants, and gaining tenure and who will likely feel pressured to follow the historical dimensions of the field and produce knowledge that supports the established power blocs. However, not to push at the boundaries or to engage in debates about such work is to accept the conventions of the field as a "natural way of producing knowledge and viewing a particular aspect of the social world" (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 683). Yet, and somewhat rearticulating Kincheloe (2001), although life on the epistemological borderlands and disciplinary boundaries may not be comfortable and requires a great degree of hard work, the rewards for such thinking and action are profound. Ultimately, this points us toward thinking about how, as a field, we determine quality and, indeed, how we evaluate scholarship. We are not advocating that all organizational researchers should become political activists. However, we are suggesting that we need, as a field, to provide a more considered space for contributions that draw on various philosophical positions to challenge—not simply reproduce—the *status quo*. Furthermore, the positioning and intent of such work should be considered important referents in judging the quality of such a scholarly contribution.

Conclusion: Rethinking Quality?

We do not want to suggest that all research in organizational studies must embrace morality, ethics, and power as central research themes, although we certainly do hope that all scholars will at least be aware of such influences within their work. Indeed, we are fully aware, given the deep institutionalization of organization theory, that it is unlikely that many will venture to address such issues. Somewhat rearticulating Burrell and Morgan (1979), we are not calling for a retreat to the paradigmatic trenches; our argument is for a field of organizational research that is strong because it is recognized as a complex field, influenced by competing and at times opposing perspectives, that does not neglect the ambiguities and nuances of the past. In this sense, organizational research can be seen as a series of vectors, no matter how imbalanced (see Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 1999), that embrace diversity, controversies, and tensions—as well as continuities—from the past, which continue to shape, refine, and create practice. This is organizational research that is in, not of, the setting, research that is cognizant of the larger society and the impact therein, separate enough from organizations to be critical, yet engaged enough to appreciate their concerns and dilemmas (Bartunek, 2002; see also Bauman, 2005). Yet with important political interventions, such as this Special Issue and the recently convened *Global Forum* (2006), it seems as if the various debates that challenge the hegemony of

epistemological approaches to the study of organizations will increasingly occur in more mainstream forums.

Thus, building on the tenets of this Special Issue, our primary focus has been to consider the assessment of quality within nonfoundational approaches, approaches that we feel can open the field of organizational research to the investigation of pressing crucial social and moral issues. Such work will force us, ever more explicitly, to think about how we know what we know, why we know it, who is advantaged and disadvantaged by modes of inquiry, how we make decisions during the research process, and what the consequences are of those decisions. Based in a moral-sacred epistemology, quality within a nonfoundational organizational study is internalized, indistinguishable from morality and axiology: Assessing quality then is inherently bound within the genre of the scholarship. Furthermore, quality criteria are far from fixed and stable: They will vary with regard to the community under investigation, the dictates of the time, and the context within which the investigator operates.

Assessing the quality of qualitative research is more than just a technical or methodological exercise. It requires an understanding of the ontological and epistemological bases of the researcher and the research. This, in turn, leads to quite different interpretations of the term *quality* and how to evidence it in our research—a democratization of quality if you will that loosens organizational research, and indeed the quality of that research, from the shackles of foundationalism. Again, this pluralism is not problematic; quite the opposite, it speaks to the very vitality of the field of organizational studies. For different approaches to qualitative research—and the quality of that research—to coexist alongside that which currently holds the center, and for such (uneasy) coexistence to stir, create debate, and push the boundaries of the field of organizational research, it is important that we judge the quality of such work without being blinkered to the varying interpretations of what this means. In this article, we have only been able to scratch the surface of the important debates over what counts as quality in qualitative organizational research. It remains of crucial importance for continual reflection on how we want to live the lives of social inquirers (Schwandt, 2000); how we grapple with issues of reciprocity, with textual positivism, with interdisciplinarity, with methodological plurality; and the mechanisms through which research can have a progressive impact on an array of communities that organizational research can potentially serve.

Notes

1. Although terms such as *positivism* and *postpositivism* are often used almost interchangeably and are certainly debated, we define *positivism* as indicative of a belief in a reality that can be uncovered, documented, and not contaminated by a researcher. Postpositivists also adopt a position that stresses the existence of an external reality but accept that it is almost impossible to perfectly realize, holding that although the researcher and the research site cannot be completely separated, steps can be taken by conscientious researchers to minimize the effects of the researcher on the findings generated (see, e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

2. There is little doubt that leading European journals that publish organizational research, such as *Organizational Studies* and *Journal of Management Studies*, are more diverse in their offerings, both in terms of the methods employed and the epistemological positions proffered, than their North American counterparts. However, even these journals are not as wide-ranging in the types of research that they publish as those in some other disciplines, such as sociology or education. Our thanks to the editors of the Special Issue for pushing us toward this clarification.

3. Such variation is similarly apparent when we consider different theoretical approaches. Although some positions, such as postmodernism or hermeneutics, are more located in a nonfoundational position and others, such as positivism or postpositivism, are clearly foundational, in most cases attempting to classify individuals or theoretical positions can be fraught with danger. This is interesting when we consider the traditional view that foundational, quasi-foundational, and nonfoundational positions are noncommensurable and even, to some degree, fixed. For example, feminist research has become a highly dynamic, diversified field that encompasses competing models of thought; divergent methodological and analytic approaches; and contesting models of representation that span foundational, quasi-foundational, and nonfoundational positions (Olesen, 2000). The situation is, to some extent, similarly clouded when we consider grounded theory. Originally conceptualized from what we consider to be a foundational position (see, e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967, and subsequently Corbin & Strauss, 1988, among others), over time, grounded theory has been modified to fit quasi-foundational and nonfoundational positions (see Charmaz, 2005). However, such developments have occurred more noticeably in disciplines such as education and sociology rather than organization studies. Here, by contrast, a reliance on the original founding ideas, often quite loose interpretations of what grounded theory is and how it should be used (see Suddaby, 2006, for an interesting discussion of this), and even an (over)reliance on analytic software to present the illusion of an emergent, objective reality devoid of researcher influence, has resulted in such work's often retaining a foundational orientation.

4. That there are crises of representation and legitimation is debated. For Snow (2002), if we are able to produce close and realistic accounts of everyday experience, then the specters of crisis diminish. Drawing on Simmel (1903/1971), Flaherty (2002) suggested that the task of qualitative research is "not to complain or to condone but only to understand" (pp. 514-515). Of course, one's political, epistemological, and axiological position may differ with Simmel—ours does—yet in the interests of balance, this position is used by Snow and Flaherty to suggest that liberation is not the primary goal of ethnographic research; rather that the social sciences are *sciences*—not revolutionary cadres. As such, Snow proposed that short of such pragmatic and attainable standards, the crisis is pronounced by a handful of scholars. He further argues whether declaration of a crisis by some number of scholars necessarily makes it so, especially when this sense of crisis is far from being universally shared among the practitioners of the enterprise in question.

5. Although most such organizational issues are indeed socially oriented to some degree, there are other potential inequities that also warrant consideration, such as environmental abuses. Thus, although we use the term *social*, we do so with the understanding that there are also other organizational problems that warrant scholarly scrutiny. Our thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

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