

Challenges for a New Critical Qualitative Inquiry: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

Discussions around constructing a new critical qualitative inquiry need to reflect challenges on three levels: (a) Inquiry can be critical about the issues under study—a social or political problem to be addressed in a critical perspective; (b) critical approaches to methods and approaches in current research—other forms (e.g., quantitative research) or parts of the mainstream of qualitative research; and (c) a major challenge is to remain able to really do empirical qualitative research addressing social problems and to remain reflexive. Articles in this special issue address these to make a contribution to constructing a new critical qualitative inquiry.

Keywords

critical qualitative inquiry, levels of critique, limits of research programs, challenges

Introduction

In the last decade, a new interest in critical qualitative inquiry has developed. This interest has become a need to take up a number of challenges facing new trends on various levels: First, in the societal development, which has intensified social problems and social inequality and weakened the situation and impact of social and societal communities. Second, on the level of scientific development, which tends to narrow down the understanding of what social science is and to look at certain approaches like the rabbit facing the snake. Examples here are evidence-based education or health, the un-reflected belief in Randomized Control studies (RCT) as the one and only approach, but also the sometimes naïve fascination of Mixed Methods Research (MMR) in many contexts. Third, on the level of politics and, in particular, of science politics and some predominant concepts of what (social) science is, what it should provide.

What is Critical Qualitative Research?

There are a number of recent suggestions of how to define critical qualitative inquiry, which are also the orientation for some of the contributions to this special issue. One of these references comes from Norman Denzin (2015, p.31), who holds:

The pursuit of social justice within a transformative paradigm challenges prevailing forms of inequality, poverty, human oppression, and injustice. This paradigm is firmly rooted in a human rights agenda. It requires an ethical framework that is rights and social justice based. It requires an awareness of “the

need to redress inequalities by giving precedence . . . to the voices of the least advantaged groups in society.” (Mertens, Holmes, & Harris, 2009, p. 89)

Kathy Charmaz (IN PRESS) refers directly to this outline in her approach:

When I speak of critical inquiry, I include concerns and studies about social justice, although it is an ambiguous and elastic concept. In its various forms, critical inquiry addresses power, inequality and injustice. Consistent with Donna Mertens (2009) and Norman Denzin (2015, p. 31), I see critical inquiry as embedded in a transformative paradigm that seeks to expose, oppose, and redress forms of oppression, inequality, and injustice. (p. 5)

Rainer Winter (2016, p. 2), for example, takes up the political claims linked to Denzin’s (2015) approach in this context:

But we stand firmly behind the belief that critical qualitative inquiry inspired by the sociological imagination can make the world a better place . . . Critical scholars . . . are committed to creating new ways of making the practices of critical qualitative inquiry central to the workings of a free democratic society. (p. 41)

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