

Handbook of Qualitative Research

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Chapter 30

Criteria for Assessing Interpretive Validity
in Qualitative Research

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POGO could have had students of ethnography in mind when he stated, "We has met the enemy, and it is us." After decades of academic and paradigmatic politics, ethnographic and qualitative research finds itself in an astonishing position. This is unanticipated by all, especially by those closest to it, who were for so many decades accustomed to its devalued, unappreciated, marginal status. There is a remarkable new interest in ethnographic and qualitative research. It occurs even in disciplines (such as education, justice studies, clinical work, legal studies, policy analysis) where the practice is underdeveloped. This growing interest has been observed by others. Evidence for the trend can be gleaned from many sources. Yet, as Pogo suggests, students of ethnography have become their own worst critics, often resurrecting epistemological issues about the problematics of "objectivity," "purpose of knowledge," and filtering through new insights about communication contexts, logic, and formats. Unprecedented criticism of ethnographic or qualitative method, substance, style, practice, and relevance has emerged. The criticism emerges not from the traditional enemies, the positivists who fault qualitative research for its failure to meet some or all of the usual positivistic criteria of truth, but from the insiders to the ethnographic movement. This trend is consistent with a newer and more extreme "reflexive turn" by ethnographic practice about 20-25 years ago. This reflexive turn has added much to our understanding of how qualitative research is actually done, but has additionally raised hitherto unanticipated dilemmas about representation and legitimation (standpoint or voice). More specifically, important questions have been raised about the role of the ethnographer in the reports produced, the basis for knowledge claims, and how a relativistic perspective in ethnography can produce solid findings.

Our purpose in this chapter is to address some of these dilemmas as we have encountered them in our work, and to offer suggestions for judging ethnographic products. Our purpose of clarifying the domain of meaningful existence poses special problems, as we have abandoned the positivists' formula for objective knowledge. A critical question is, How should interpretive methodologies be judged by readers who share the perspective that *how* knowledge is acquired, organized, and interpreted is relevant to *what* the claims are? Our position is this: As long as we strive to base our claims and interpretations of social life on data of any kind, we must have a logic for assessing and communicating the interactive process through which the investigator acquired the research experience and information. If we are to understand the "detailed means through which human beings

