In defence of the ‘New Qualitative Methods’: the Australian Context

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Abstract
The growth and employment of non-traditional research methods has increased dramatically over the last few decades, especially within the United States and the United Kingdom. With the increase of globalisation of research these new methodologies are gaining use and credibility within the human disciplines in Australia. The following paper attempts to examine the new methodologies movement from an historical context, funding perspective and as part of the wider, morally oriented ‘culture wars’ that have been playing out on the main arena of Australian socio-political life over the past decade. It argues that regardless of the increased call to employ engaged and innovative research the constraints of the Australian funding and political environment has resulted in the maintenance and dominance of traditional methodological approaches.

Introduction
To date the emergence of interpretive, arts-based qualitative research methodologies has been a relatively understated movement within Australia compared to the rugged quarrying out of methodological legitimacy in the United States over the past two decades. In Australia this methodological movement has its committed band of scholars, primarily women, who go confidently and determinedly about their work, using and promoting their research practices and passing on their knowledge and techniques to a growing number of committed post-graduate students. For those of us observing from the sideline there is a vague feeling that arts-based social inquiry can offer something that more traditional empirical methods cannot, even while the scientific sacred cows of objectivity, replication and rigour, as well as concerns for where that next grant or promotion will come from, continue to gnaw away.
Reflecting on the emergence, perception and employment of new qualitative research in Australia, it is necessary to not only review the nature of that enquiry with its various historical, theoretical and methodological underpinnings, but also to consider the conditions outside of academic walls under which this kind of research is possible. Over the past few decades, Australia has witnessed changing conditions under which qualitative research has been conducted, including political and economic contexts which have impacted on the general perception of qualitative research as well as framing the work of researchers generally.

In regard to the political context, parallels can be drawn between Australia and the United States where the ‘culture wars’ and neo-conservatism have attempted to undermine certain forms of research, particularly postmodern and qualitative research (Lincoln and Cannella, 2004), that try to establish alternative viewpoints and a diversity of ideas. Indeed in 2006, the then Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, personally vetoed seven projects from receiving funding from the Australian Research Council (ARC) (Haigh, 2006). Although information on the specific projects never became public knowledge, it was reported that five of the projects were from the humanities and two from the social sciences (Haigh, 2006). Information about the process of the review and possible basis of the vetoes was also leaked by one of the non-academic panel members of the Quality and Standards Committee. In the editorial of *Quadrant*, the formerly left-leaning political commentator Padriac McGuinness (2006: 3) argues that “the intellectual rigour of the sciences is increasingly absent from the humanities and social sciences”. He contends that “the humanities are being, and largely have been, destroyed in the name of the
meaningless subject of ‘cultural studies’ and corrupted by ‘postmodernism’, which has become a substitute for thought and scholarship” (McGuinness, 2006: 4).

McGuinness’ hostile statements towards the social sciences have been echoed elsewhere, but most noticeably within the Herald Sun by the prominent columnist and Culture War protagonist, Andrew Bolt who often speaks of “the mind rot in our universities” (cited Haigh, 2006). The assault on academic freedom combined with these widely read statements can be argued to represent a backlash against the human disciplines and qualitative research methodologies. Macintyre (2007: 58) argues that one of the main reasons for this assault was the abandonment by researchers in the humanities and social sciences to engage with the ‘scientific search for truth’. He continues:

[m]any in the humanities understand their disciplines as involving a process of inquiry that is necessarily interpretive, neither testing a hypothesis nor producing a verifiable result, but rather offering interpretations that are always partial, perspectival and contingent. Many in the social sciences would reject the notion of intellectual inquiry as a neutral and disinterested activity. These positions do not negate the need for honesty and rigour, nor do they lessen the adherence to the professional paradigm, but they might well have weakened the epistemological foundations of academic freedom.

Economically speaking neo-liberalism has also impacted on Australian Universities, forcing them to adopt a more commercial, entrepreneurial and managerial environment (Marginson and Considine, 2000, Harman, 2005). Within three decades the university sector has moved from one of high dependence on annual
Commonwealth Government grants to one where these same grants now support less than 50 per cent of university income. In 1973, the Whitlam Government abolished fees for all higher education students. A decade later a free university education was replaced by the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), and in recent years there has been a push to increase full-fee paying students to 30 per cent of the student population. This is a clear demonstration of the commercialisation shift of the sector which in turn has created a system that is increasingly characterised by pressure on academics to attract external research funding and to be more financially productive in research.

The university wide push toward a commercially oriented research and development culture has led to a battle for scarce resources. In 2008, for instance, only 21.4 per cent of projects submitted to the ARC received funding (Australian Research Council, 2007). This is in an environment which has few other sources of public or private research funding. The other major source of external funding for Australian researchers is the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). This funding body’s success rate is marginally higher than the ARC with 2008 commencing projects at 27.9 per cent. In relation to researchers from the human disciplines, many believe that they have been starved of research funds as well as being largely forgotten by policy makers. Indeed, Harman (2005) illustrates that 70 per cent of surveyed social science researchers believe that they are undervalued by the operator of the National Competitive Grants Program, the ARC. Furthermore, the NHMRC is known to marginalize if not outright reject qualitative methodologies. In 1995 the NHMRC rated evidence from qualitative research at the lowest level; this was soon followed by the removal of qualitative evidence from its quality of evidence
scale altogether (Geanellos, 2004). In essence, rather than a broadening of acceptance and inclusion of qualitative methodologies, it can be argued that based on the context presented Australian social scientists are excluded from one of the two peak funding bodies and marginalized from the other.

Social scientists are less successful in attracting support from national competitive grant schemes as well as from business and industry than their science and technology counterparts. In an analysis of comparative data for Go8 universities, Harman (2005) found that only 15 per cent of social science researchers were successful in gaining an ARC discovery grant compared with 47 per cent of their science and technology counterparts. Generalizing Harman’s findings is problematic when evaluating the *Discovery Projects Selection Report* for funding commencing in 2008. The success rate for researchers stemming from the social, behavioural and economic (SBE) disciplines was listed at 21.7 per cent, for the humanities and creative arts (HCA) disciplines it was marginally less at 21 per cent. Both categories of disciplines performed reasonably well, where SBE was only outperformed by physics, chemistry and geoscience (PCG) disciplines whose success rate was recorded at 22.6 per cent. The difference is marginal; however, what should be emphasized is that the PCG disciplines have a success rate greater than their representation among the total number of grant application proposals.

The politics and institutional forces that fund research, structure policies, educate researchers as well as reproduce forms of enquiry demonstrates how Australian researchers are engaged and linked to a particular social moment that well might hinder the embracement of the qualitative, interpretive and non-deterministic points of
view that have developed in research methodologies (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). As Krug and Hepworth (1997: 51) argue:

These structures determine to a large degree whether research shall take a stance that seeks to make statements about a research area based on a range of ‘positivist’ approaches regarded as scientific, or whether research will take a stance that seeks, through ‘subjective, interpretive or naturalistic’ approaches.

This sentiment is echoed by McCalman (cited Haigh, 2006) who argues that the effects of the vetoing of ARC approved projects are still to be played out, particularly in the form of academic self-censorship: “You watch, young academics will sheer away from gender, because of the perception that it’s being monitored. The fact is that in this country we have no other form of research advancement apart from the government. And it gives them a power like no other country.”

The emergence of qualitative methodologies

To aid in unpacking the emergence of qualitative methodologies within the Australian context it is useful to focus on Denzin and Lincoln’s (2000) outline of the history of qualitative research in the human disciplines. According to them there are seven moments that can be distinguished. These include the traditional (1900-1950); the modernist or golden age (1950-1970); blurred genres (1970-1986); the crisis of representation (1986-1990); the postmodern, a period of experimental and new ethnographies (1990-1995); post-experimental inquiry (1995-2000); and the future (2000 - ). Although space does not allow an extensive overview of each stage, the stages are briefly summarised as follows.
The traditional period represents a time when qualitative researchers were firmly entrenched within the positivist paradigm. Accounts from these researchers were bound within the language and objectives of this paradigm. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) associate the traditional period with discussions of the scientific principles of objective ethnography espoused by researchers such as Malinowski as well as the urban ethnography practiced by the Chicago School. The second moment, the ‘golden age’, is associated with the formalization of qualitative methods as a rigorous equal to its quantitative counterpart. Obviously, researchers within this time period were still heavily engaged with the language of positivism and what became known as post-positivism. The gradual necessity for a ‘bilingual’ dictionary of methodologies emerged with the onset of what Denzin and Lincoln call the ‘blurred genres’, or the third stage of what Perrti (2005) terms their progress narrative. Here the approaches of the human disciplines was slowly opening up to a more pluralistic, interpretative and open-ended perspective. It was during this time period that the privileged voice of the observer and his/her interpretations were challenged.

The crisis of representation occurred, according to the authors, with the appearance of research that called into question the issues of class, race and gender as well as bringing to the fore the ideas of the reflexive writer and researcher. Books such as Writing Culture (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), Works and Lives (Geertz, 1988) and The Predicament of Culture (Clifford, 1988) critiqued the premise of the ‘objective’ ethnography, and accordingly new methods, models of truth and representation were sought. It was during this period that “issues such as validity, reliability, and objectivity, previously believed settled, were once more problematic” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:26). The postmodern period is defined by the authors as
one characterised by experimental and new ethnographies. Denzin and Lincoln make reference to Ellis and Bochner’s (1996) work *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing* to highlight the triple crisis of representation, legitimation and praxis that researchers were grappling with.

The post-experimental stage followed closely by the last stage the ‘future’ are jointly discussed by Denzin and Lincoln. The authors present a time period where fictional ethnographies, ethnographic poetry, and multimedia texts are taken for granted (2000: 29). It is in the present, the authors argue, that the post-experimental writer seeks to “connect their writings to the needs of a free democratic society. The demands of a moral and sacred qualitative social science are actively being explored by a host of new writers from many different disciplines” (ibid.).

The attempt to map qualitative research and situate them within historical moments is a useful tool when analysing the various epistemologies that have developed over time which in turn have impacted on research methodologies. Denzin and Lincoln’s framework provides details of the different major directions that qualitative methodology debates have witnessed. Accordingly, the framework can readily be applied to areas outside of North America, especially when considering how the social sciences have seen a gradual reorganization of information flows within the global community of the human disciplines (Pettri, 2004).

The hesitancy in applying this model to the Australian context is not based on the argument of the ‘globalisation of research’ (Pettri, 2004), rather it relates to the concerns outlined above. Furthermore, the framework is presented as one that
encompasses multiple disciplines and disciplinary practices. It is apparent that different areas of the social sciences do not change at the same rate. Denzin and Lincoln do present their framework as one that should be considered somewhat superficial as it is ‘socially constructed, [and] quasi-historical’ (2000: 2), however, it fails to acknowledge the institutional and political forces that fund research and structure policies. It is these external forces that have their own local histories which in effect can determine the methodological stance a researcher will employ. For instance, researchers within the human disciplines concentrating on public health will most likely still be battling with the ‘crisis of representation’ stage that Denzin and Lincoln situate within the late 1980s. As Brody (1991) argues ‘any discussion of qualitative methods in medical research must begin with a defence of using them at all’. This sentiment has certainly been duplicated in later publications and most recently explored in Carter and Little’s (2007) article entitled “Justifying Knowledge, Justifying Method”.

This leads us to question Australia’s relation to the North American framework presented. Obviously, Australian researchers grapple with the same questions of ontology, epistemology and methodology that their North American counterparts do. This is evidenced by the interest and employment of theoretical resources from overseas, especially the UK and USA (Bartlett, 1994). This influence, which some have argued is a complete dependence (Connell, 2005), has created similar methodological terrains within the two countries. Yet differences remain. As Krug and Hepworth (1997: 52) argue ‘[t]he epistemological dog wags the methodological tail, and epistemologies are always grounded within larger social practices’.
Conclusion

Although the basic structure and aims of the modern university have remained relatively consistent over the years, subject matters and ways of knowing certainly have not. The modern university of Renaissance Europe was primarily concerned with philosophy, antiquities and religion. It was not until the 19th century that the university became gripped by scientific methodology, an obsession which affected every discipline from the economy to business management to social behavior.

From the late 1970s post-modernism injected some much needed debate about different ways of knowing and understanding the world, even if at certain times and places this took an almost maniacal turn. Judging by the frothing reaction of the scientific purists, however, post-modernist discourse certainly seems to have hit a mark. Nevertheless, as funding discrimination, political interference into research and conservative media commentary attest, at least in Australia the hold of science as the way of knowing remains strong. After all, it has its uses and beneficiaries.

However, in a culturally complex, economically stratified, war torn world there are imperative reasons for supporting methodologies that give voice to those left silenced and oppressed; that develop innovative ways of communicating knowledge, employ methods which physically and intellectually reveal human complexity, provide space for non-academic contributions to knowledge, and which champion social justice through purposeful practice. With the increasing call to engaged and innovative research the academic community needs to go beyond the production of orthodox outputs and develop democratic ways of acquiring, representing and communicating knowledge. The new methodologies agenda has much to offer here.
Accordingly, in Australia qualitative methods are employed with increasing frequency across the broad spectrum of the human disciplines. We still appear to be within a time period where empiricism flourishes (Connell, 2005) and where the use of qualitative methods still needs to be defended. It is evident that Australian researchers are engaging with methodologies found within Denzin and Lincoln’s ‘future’ time frame. However, what is assumed by Denzin and Lincoln as the norm or ‘taken for granted’ is better described as ‘marginal’ within the Australia context.

Reference List


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i In 2001 the ARC introduced this Committee to aid in ensuring consistency of judgement across panels. In 2005 Brendon Nelson made three non-academic additions to the board and broadened the responsibilities of the Committee to include consideration of National Benefit. The new lay members included the former High Court Judge Sir Daryl Dawson, the then editor of Quadrant magazine Padraic McGuinness and the television anchorman Ross Symonds. (Haigh, 2006; Macintyre, 2007).

ii Rates methodologies and ascribes values to their evidence.

iii The Group of Eight represents Australia’s leading Universities. It has been operating as an informal network of vice-chancellors since 1994 and was formally incorporated in 1999. The group consists of the University of Queensland, the University of New South Wales, the University of Sydney, the Australian National
University, the University of Melbourne, Monash University, the University of Adelaide, and the University of Western Australia.

iv For SBE there were 837 proposals considered and 182 were approved. For HCA there were 715 submitted proposal and 150 were approved. PCG submitted 696 proposals and had 157 approved.