Relational Validity and the "Where" of Inquiry: Place and Land in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This article reviews discussions of place in qualitative research that have appeared in *Qualitative Inquiry* over the past 20 years to foreground a conceptualization of critical place inquiry. The article describes relational validity and emphasizes possibilities for engaging place more meaningfully in qualitative inquiry.

Keywords

place, relational validity, critical place inquiry

In our view, *Qualitative Inquiry* (*QI*)—a journal founded to push and deepen the theories and practices of qualitative research—has always delivered on its sense of occasion. Early issues (and many that followed) debated the "new," commented on the timeliness, and prodded the history of qualitative research and its uptake. The December 1999 issue raised questions about what forms of qualitative inquiry and communication would be needed in the new millennium. To celebrate and commemorate 20 years of *QI*, contributors are called to anticipate the debates, aporias, and now-and-future strides in the field for the next generation.

In this commentary, on this occasion, we consider the "where" of qualitative research—a where that notices the tendency to rely upon temporality as a stand-in for place, and asks questions about what might be possible if place were engaged more meaningfully in qualitative research. Although *QI* has perhaps featured many of the temporal aspects of the field, it has not been silent on the where of qualitative research. In this commentary, we mark the forays into place that *QI* has made to launch a discussion of what we have come to call critical place inquiry, specifically detailing the ethical imperatives of relational validity in research that is responsive to people and place.

Recently, we have been writing about the need to focus on place in research (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015; Tuck, McKenzie, & McCoy, 2014), a need situated within the proliferation of writers and readers of decolonizing and Indigenous theories, new materialisms, spatial theory, and critical and comparative geographies. Although one might suppose that such innovations and recalibrations might prompt a more robust discussion of place in the social sciences, this is not often the case. Place—the thread that links these theories—is not always engaged with complexity, or at all. In many cases, flattened ontological or materialist frameworks de-emphasize the agency of people and politics in attempting to better attend to the interconnected networks or mangles of practice in researching social life; while the spatial turn has emphasized global flows of people, information, and products, in many instances resulting in a turning away from a focus on place in theoretical or empirical study. In contrast, Indigenous intellectual contributions rarely fail to engage in issues of land and place—especially via conceptualizations of tribal identity, sovereignty, and treaty rights—yet when these discussions are taken up by non-Indigenous and settler scholars, the salience of land/place is frequently left out of the picture.

Thus, it is our view that scholars influenced by these turns often do not go far enough to attend to place and land. There are important exceptions to each of these characterizations, but ironically, works across social science which now are attending to issues of being and existence can rely upon conceptualizations of place that are markedly shallow or emptied. This sentiment is expounded in a 2014 *QI* article by Kate Isabel Booth (2014), who, reading Anderson, Adey, and Bevan (2010), observes,

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Despite the growing prominence of place in the social sciences the "difference that place makes to methodology has not been fully integrated into traditional research practice" (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 592). [There is] a need to systematically and reflexively account for place and places in research, alongside the social position of the researcher and methods, and call for methodologies to be operationalized "as if place mattered" (ibid., p. 600). (p. 1)

Indeed, the challenge is to get rich theorizations (and methodologies and methods) of place to travel within and alongside the adoption and adaptation of these turns, and other turns now forming and emerging.

Booth explains,

Place can be conceptualized as internally related—constituted through the relations that it holds, and that holds it, within world; as more-than-human—constituted through both human and nonhuman collaboration and corroboration; as process—constituted by relations that are never static as they ebb and flow in situationally unique ways; and as unbounded—constituted by relations that are implicated within, and have implications for broader, wider, or deeper web works (through both time and space; Booth, 2010). Moreover, and perhaps most significantly, place can be described as impressive—that due to this fluid interdependence place makes an impression or stands out as a powerful constituting element (or intersection of elements) in relation to all things, beings, and happenings. In short, place matters. (Booth, 2014, p. 4)

Booth (2014) uses gestalt ontology to elevate the notion of place from intersubjective experience to concrete content, so that "a sense of a place is as real to the place as it is to the experiencer" (p. 6).

In 2013, *QI* published a special issue on space, place, and social justice in education (Vol. 19, Issue 10), edited by Geoffrey N. Bright, Helen Manchester, and Sylvie Allendyke. In their opening editorial, the guest editors ask,

How is justice related to space and place? Well, that "practice" to which Barad refers, that yearning, those entanglements, all occur in space; at least as far as space is a constantly productive "encounter, assembly, simultaneity . . . [of] everything that there is in space . . . Everything: living beings, things, objects, works, signs and symbols" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 101). They also occur in time or, more precisely in "space-time" (Massey, 1992). And in place, where "porous networks of social relations" (Massey, 1994, p. 121) are configured contingently through localized and contested "power geometries" (Massey, 1994). What is more, those yearnings and entanglements are affective. They flow through what Thrift (2008) has called spatialities of feeling. (Bright, Manchester, & Allendyke, 2013, p. 747)

Inside the special issue, Philip Roberts and Bill Green (2013) describe the usefulness of spatial thinking, which "allows time to pause, to dwell on particularities and

subjectivities, and to recognize the affordances of places" (p. 772). Roberts and Green build atop Soja's (2010) concept of "spatial justice," to argue for the need for spatial understanding in redressing inequities. As a whole, the special issue suggests the significance of spatial theories for educational justice, especially how injustices are framed and experienced.

Previous writing in *QI* has also outlined implications of place for methodologies and methods of research. Rachel Fendler (2013) in the same special issue describes ethnographic practices of place-making as requiring a double task of understanding how participants signify space through their practices and accounting for that significance in the ethnography itself. Fendler (2013) notes that place-making is aligned with a/r/tographic practices which make transparent how "research creates the space of inquiry, to study it" (p. 789). In an article published by *QI* in 2010, Kimberly Powell theorizes the contributions of mapping for encountering, (re)presenting, and evoking multisensory and embodied experiences of empirical material. Powell's (2010) use of mapping seeks to disrupt conventional uses and appearances of maps, observing,

while visual methods have gained attention in the social sciences with the corresponding increase in visibility and frequency of images and of visual culture theories, visual material still often seems to be explained and rationalized within the context of text. (pp. 540-541)

Powell's article points to the incomplete adoption of visual methods within qualitative research and the primacy of text as translation of empirical material.

The final (and perhaps first) direct discussion of place to be published in *QI* appeared in 2000, by Jan Nespor. Nespor (2000) is concerned about practices of anonymization in social science, specifically attempts to conceal, congeal, or disguise the place name of the location of research. Anonymization of place and settings has

both (a) ontological effects, in helping decouple events from specific locations and facilitating their use in certain kinds of theoretical claims, and (b) political implications, in distancing the participants and events described from a public sphere shared with researchers and readers. (Nespor, 2000, pp. 546-547)

Nespor works in the article to suspend the assumption that such anonymizing measures *can* prevent identification and harm, and to argue that even thinking that anonymizing place is possible and beneficial can be attributed to the problematic tendency to separate events from their places. Such attempts are "shaved off from politics, history, geography, urban form, popular culture, and so forth—that is, from the very processes that make a book . . . meaningful . . ." (Nespor, 2000, p. 552). The professional standards which

require researchers to treat places as anonymous not only dovetail with the ongoing privatization of public spaces, they also "seriously limit our ability to analyze the self-inscriptions that index place making and boundary construction practices, especially those of the powerful" (Nespor, 2000, p. 554). Nespor recommends the abandonment of place anonymization as the default practice, and anticipates that this would require researchers to change their relations with participants and often require researchers to be more openly politically engaged.

Critical Place Inquiry

Our work to envision the "what next" of qualitative inquiry takes up the challenges issued by Nespor to imagine what relations might entail if place were not habitually concealed in research. Elsewhere we have theorized the entrenched tendencies of social science to disregard place (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015): The tendencies can be traced to the roots of the Western intellectual tradition, in Descartes' (1637) cleaving of the mind from the body, and of the individual from society and nature, with the declaration *cogito ergo sum*. N. Smith (2008) concludes that it is the coproduction of capitalism and science which has ideologically located humans as separate from nature, or better said to reflect the anthropocentricity of this ideology, nature as outside of humans.

The tendency to disregard place in social science is also connected to the proliferation of postmodern and postpositivist theories of the late 20th century. In focusing on the role of language in mediating social life, postmodernism and associated social theories struggled with the attendant loss of knowledge of the real and implications for understanding human identity or subjectivity, culture, and the role of research in contributing to such understandings. This enabled the interruption of linearities of modernism and positivism, as well as the dismantling of hegemonies based on essentialist understandings of identity or culture. However, with an emphasis on the discursive, or the mediated aspects of social life such as language and institutional practices, many postmodern social theories focused on epistemology at the expense of the ontological or material, emphasizing the social construction of places, if considering place and land at all.

A final explanation for this tendency comes from theorizations of settler colonialism. Settler colonialism is a form of colonialism in which outsiders come to make a new home on the land that is already inhabited by other humans. In this form of colonialism, it is land/place, that is the ultimate pursuit, rather than extractions (spices, gold, or labor) as in other forms of colonialism. Settler societies are designed to not consider place—to do so would require consideration of genocide (Grande, 2004). Settler societies are based on ongoing displacement and dispossession of people in relation to land. Theorizations of settler colonialism

expose deep behaviors of ignorance toward land, water, environment, and sustainability, as evidenced in fuel extractions, agricultural practices, pollution and toxic dumping, hyper-development, and water use. Turning toward place necessitates acknowledgment and reparations based on these histories: of settler colonialism, capitalism, and of Cartesian and (post)modern separations of mind from body, body from land. As humans make our planet increasingly toxic, unlivable, and at the same time increasingly inequitable, at what point might these cleavages be sewn back together, might we account for our pasts and to future generations? Are we capable of "post carbon social theories" of place (Elliott & Urry, 2010) that address ongoing obsessions with expansion and capitalism; more, are we capable of living post carbon social lives? We believe that theorizing and practicing place more deeply is at least a step in the direction of such a path.

To this end, we have worked over the past several years to describe critical place inquiry, a set of concepts, practices, and theories which move beyond understandings of place as a neutral backdrop, or as a bounded and antiquated concept, or as only a physical landscape. Critical place inquiry can involve and include a range of research methodologies and methods (outlined in full in Tuck & McKenzie, 2015); what is central is the way the chosen methodology and methods engage place explicitly and politically.

Critical place inquiry:

- understands places as themselves mobile, shifting over time and space and through interactions with flows of people, other species, social practices;
- entails, at a more localized level, understanding places as both influencing social practices as well as being performed and (re)shaped through practices and movements of individuals and collectives;
- conceptualizes place as interactive and dynamic due to these time–space characteristics;
- recognizes that disparate realities determine not only how place is experienced but also how it is understood and practiced in turn (e.g., in relation to culture, geography, gender, race, sexuality, age, or other identifications and experiences);
- addresses spatialized and place-based processes of colonization and settler colonialism, and works against their *forgone-ness* or naturalization through social science research;
- extends beyond considerations of the social to more deeply consider the land itself and its non-human inhabitants and characteristics as they determine and manifest place;
- aims to further generative and critical politics of places through such conceptualizations/practices and via a relational ethics of accountability to people and place;

- takes seriously the conceptual and empirical contributions of Indigenous epistemologies of land.

In recent years, important moves have been made to critique the gaps between critical approaches and Indigenous approaches to knowing and research (Grande, 2004; L. T. Smith, 2012) and to bridge those gaps, at least by placing Indigenous theories alongside critical theories and methodologies (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008). The critical intellectual tradition has not always been accountable to Indigenous peoples (Grande, 2004). Often, the social justice projects of the critical intellectual tradition compete with Indigenous justice projects related to sovereignty and decolonization (Grande, 2004; Tuck & Yang, 2012), and much of critical theory remains unresponsive to the critiques raised by Indigenous scholars (see Grande, 2004; Tuck & Fine, 2007; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, for more discussion on this). Our framing of critical place inquiry puts Indigenous theories, methodologies, and methods at the center, not on the periphery. It does this not by simply pasting on Indigenous work, as is often done in liberal multicultural discourse. Instead, it engages Indigenous work on its own terms, in adherence to its own commitments and conditions. A task of critical place inquiry is to organize itself around commitments to Indigenous social and political theory—including Indigenous sovereignty, refusal, and the non-abstraction of land—not as peripheral points or extra considerations, but as foundational to its praxis.

Relational Validity

We close this commentary with a discussion of how validity might be approached within a critical place inquiry framework. Validity, of course, is an unsatisfactory term, a label that is "inaccurate yet necessary" (Spivak, 1997, p. xii, as quoted in Koro-Ljungberg, 2010, p. 603). Validity has been taken up by many authors in *QI* over the past 20 years (Beach 2003; Cho & Trent, 2009; Flaherty, 1996; Freeman, 2011; Koro-Ljungberg, 2004, 2010; Kvale, 1995; Lather, 1995; Polkinghorne, 2007; Watson, 2009) Writing in *QI* in 2010, Mirka Koro-Ljungberg argues that, though much has been done in the field of qualitative inquiry to refute the political, epistemological, teleological projects of validity, it is a discussion that cannot be ignored because ignoring it may exclude qualitative researchers from policy conversations, which may affect our work and the communities with which we collaborate. Koro-Ljungberg makes a Derrida-inspired rejoinder to the discourse on validity by framing a "responsible" researcher, one who is methodologically "uncertain and responsive," willing to revise and reconceptualize research as it enfolds and considers the historical conditions of research, moving far beyond institutional approvals, and asking how her research can be most beneficial to groups

struggling to resist oppression (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010, p. 605).

In our own work (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015), we have set about describing relational validity—a set of precepts and implications for critical place inquiry which share a filial relationship with Koro-Ljungberg's (2010) "responsibility," Lather's (1984, 1991) catalytic validity, and Fine's (2008) provocative validity. Relational validity is based on paradigmatic understandings of the relationality of life. Discussing the words of his father Stan Wilson (2001), Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) discusses the concept of Self as relationship in Indigenous research. He writes,

> Identity for Indigenous peoples is grounded in their relationships with the land, with their ancestors who have returned to the land and with future generations who will come into being on the land. Rather than viewing ourselves as being *in* relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationships that we hold and are part of. (p. 80)

Relational validity prioritizes the reality that human life is connected to and dependent on other species and the land.

Thus, relational validity is based on the understanding that the prioritization of "economic validity" is harmful for people, other forms of life, and places. While only a few years ago a discourse of climate change denial was prevalent and growing (Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, & Hmielowski, 2012), we have entered a new stage in which human extinction from the planet is a realistic and very probable concern (Sarmiento, Sean, Tola, & Hantel, 2014). The economic, individualist, and anthropocentric paradigm of Western (post)modernism continues to expand in its current globalizing and neoliberal forms (Peck, 2013). In its global reach, it binds increasing numbers of governance practices to the support of fossil fuel and other extractive industries, resulting in the neglect of a fiduciary responsibility to ensure the fulfillment of the right to clean water, air, and land. As a result, "the tensions of capitalism are being played out on a global, biospheric scale and thus implicate the future of life on earth" (Cooper, 2008, p. 49, in Pierce, 2012, p. 24). This is an economic paradigm that banks its future on scientific and technological advances designed to capitalize on forms of life (Pierce, 2012).

Thus, relational validity implies that research is not only about understanding or chronicling the relationality of life and the inadequacy of economic validity but also that research necessarily influences these conditions in small or significant ways; it thus impels action and increased accountability to people and place. Because no action is an action, and because not acting has implications, a more adequate response is required for current and future injustices (McKenzie, 2009). The legacies of the spatial practices of European colonization over the past 500 years in many

parts of the globe continue to be supported by governments but also social practices more generally, which also establish and reify hierarchies of settler over Indigenous. Doreen Massey (2005) expresses the urgency of place this way:

> What is special about place is not some romance of a pre-given collective identity or of the eternity of the hills. Rather, what is special about place is precisely that throwntogetherness, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now (itself drawing on a history and a geography of thens and theres); and a negotiation which must take place within and between both human and nonhuman. This is no way denies a sense of wonder: what could be more stirring than walking the high fells in the knowledge of the history and the geography that has made them here today. This is the event of place. (p. 140)

On the occasion of 20 years of *QI*, these words from Massey prompt us to consider as researchers, how we are contributing to place as event through our research. It is the specificity, the rootedness of place that makes it so important in social science, and in (post)human imagination. We urge readers and colleagues to reconsider place and its implications, not because it offers a generalizable theory or universal interpretation, but because generalizability and universality are impossibilities anyway, in no small part because place matters and place is always specific. The environmental consequences of deluding ourselves into believing that place does not matter are stark and creeping. Place is significant, and our inquiries will become more significant through this recognition.

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