

AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL BASIS  
FOR  
QUALITATIVE EVALUATION

BY

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## INTRODUCTION

### Historical Overview

Although qualitative methodologies in the Western scientific sense have been around since the 19th century, the prominence of positivist theories and quantitative methods has overshadowed them almost to exclusion until the 1960's (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, pp. 3-4). Qualitative evaluation was essentially the domain of the few who rejected the mainstream research approach of Western empirical science. The renewed interest in qualitative methodologies during the past 20 years may be viewed as a swelling of these heretical ranks brought about largely because of a dissatisfaction with the results produced by methodologies derived from the natural sciences. In speaking of these dissenters, Christians and Carey say:

. . . there are some who think American social scientists have confused words with deeds, intentions with realizations, hopes with achievements, the fish story with the fish. As Anthony Giddes has recently written, 'On the available results, the social sciences are clearly a failure.' Moreover, such failure is not because the social sciences still await their Newton. It is an increasingly widespread view, particularly in Europe, that the subject matter of the social sciences is distinctively different from the natural sciences, thus creating a set of philosophical and methodological problems of a radically peculiar kind. There is considerable disagreement, of course, as to just what this distinctiveness entails but all roads lead to a common conclusion: there is no warrant for believing that the social sciences should imitate the natural sciences in form or method or even that they will ever achieve the same types of success.

(Christians and Carey, 1981, p. 2)

This statement provides a fresh starting point for a look at what has gone under the banner of qualitative evaluation in the fairly recent past. For the purposes of this paper, there is no need to argue for the adoption of alternative methodologies in the social sciences, for this has

already been done (Christians and Carey, 1981; Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Stake, 1978; Pilarzyk and Bharadwaj, 1979), with a rejection of positivism underlying almost all approaches to qualitative evaluation. However, Scriven identifies a very real problem when he says that ". . . dustbowl empiricism and radical behaviorism had their day, but the task for us now is principally to realize how much damage they have left behind that we have not yet noticed or reconstructed . . . (Scriven, 1972, p. 97)." "The major reason for the choice of topic for this paper is the view that the most serious damage done by Western science has primarily been at the epistemological level. That is, all methodologies currently accepted by the Western scholarly/scientific community are still based upon the enslaving belief of science that science itself is "the standard for all valid knowledge, with all other forms of human knowing strictly evaluated in terms of their approximation to natural science (Christians and Carey, 1981, p. 7)." Therefore, a major contention of this paper is that what has passed for qualitative methods in Western scholarship is not significantly different from positivism to be credited with "anti-positivist" origins, but is rather something that would be better called neo-positivism. As long as proponents of qualitative evaluation continue to share an epistemological basis with the positivists, they will not gain substantially different results.

#### General Objectives

The immediate purpose of this paper is to present an epistemological basis for qualitative evaluation. In the process of doing this, some general objectives associated with qualitative methodological research will also hopefully be accomplished. Specifically, the types of problems that

are best solved by qualitative evaluation will be generally outlined with some specific examples given. The meaning of the term "qualitative evaluation" should become clear when one understands the epistemological basis of the speaker, so the connection between knowing, evaluating, and meaning, regardless of context, should become apparent.

The presentation of a systematic method of evaluation must be preceded by the formulation of an internally consistent way of knowing. Although this is an attempt at epistemological theory building, it will often be illustrated by concrete, practical problems of evaluation. Therefore, the link between theory and practice should always be apparent, although a detailed presentation of a systematic method of evaluation based upon the epistemological foundations to be presented is beyond the scope of this paper. Finally, the product of this thesis should be viewed as one epistemological alternative illustrating merely that there are ways of viewing the world, significantly different from that of Western science, that have meaning and value in terms of practical consequences.

#### Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this paper are twofold: (1) the presentation of a sound and internally consistent epistemological basis for qualitative evaluation, and (2) the illustration of the wide-ranging effects and consequences of varying one's way of knowing (specifically in this case via a comparison between what is seen as the common epistemological basis of Western scholarship and the alternative to be presented). The mode of presentation will be an analysis of points that are seen as fundamental to epistemological theory building; some background to these points now follows.