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An Unbridgeable Gap - Barry Schwartz, University of Georgia

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Footnotes' recent article on standards for evaluating qualitative research (July/August, 2009:4) triggered my memory of Charles Horton Cooley's private thoughts on the matter. Cooley's comments appear in the journals he kept during the early twentieth century (Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan), but they tell us much about our own time and about the methodological alternatives—and issues—that define and divide us.

Footnotes reports on an NSF committee's call for standards for the design and appraisal of qualitative research. No goal could be more relevant to students of culture, but the report is insensitive to both the resistance of qualitative talent to standardization and to the difficulty of cultivating such talent among students. Charles Horton Cooley, America's first great cultural psychologist, states the problem with force and clarity.

"Methodology," Cooley observes, "is a little like religion. It is something we need everyday, something we are irresistibly impelled to talk about, but regarding which we never seem to reach a definite conclusion." Cooley's analogy can be pushed further. If method is likened to religion, then sociology must have two sources of faith: one based on the quantitative method of what Cooley called "mensurative science;" another based on the qualitative method of "sympathetic understanding." For Cooley, these two methods lead us to two unique ways of understanding the world. The distinction, as Cooley articulates it, informs the NSF Report.

Quantitative researchers of Cooley's day, no less than our own, defined objective knowledge as replicable knowledge. As a former engineer, Cooley shared this conviction, but he never found objectivity to be a virtue of good sociology. When he announces that "the facts of sociology are facts of sympathetic insight that must be attained mainly by an open and watchful imagination," he gives voice to the inescapably *personal* nature of qualitative inquiry. Allowed free rein to their imaginations, Cooley feels, no two observers looking at the same thing can ever be expected to see the same thing. To those who take this disparity as an obstacle to the establishment of a science of sociology, Cooley offers no resistance. If sociologists fail to build up a cumulative body of knowledge, he explains, it is because "the dramatic and intuitive perceptions that underlie social knowledge are so individual, so subjective, that we cannot expect that men will be able to agree upon them or build them up into an increasing structure of truth." For Cooley, then, qualitative analysis is something less—and more—than the scientific method applied to nonquantifiable phenomena.

Given the idiosyncrasy of the qualitative vision, scientific standards can never be applied to it. "The sooner we cease circumscribing and testing ourselves by the canons of physical and physiological science," insists Cooley, "the better." Instead, he invokes an intuitive criterion of merit. If one vision is to be preferred over another, the judgmental standard must acknowledge not only that vision's plausibility but also, if not mainly, the richness of its description, the subtlety and coherence of its message—in short, that pattern of qualities which, though not quite tangible, we nevertheless recognize and respond to. Expressing Cooley's conviction that sociology is more an art form than a science, this canon of judgement is unabashedly elitist: truth is discovered not by the application of standard procedures, which most can be taught to master, but by the personal insight of a gifted few. Correspondingly, the means by which such insights are attained can be imparted "only to the selected few who are fit to appreciate it." "Such a school as I would like to found," Cooley concludes, "would have few scholars."

Because qualitative research admits of no directly teachable methodology, qualitative methods courses can only be offered as electives, to be taken mainly by an aristocracy of talent. The more definite content of quantitative methods, on the other hand, can be offered in required courses for the mass of students. If a certain uniformity of vision is not the purpose of quantitative analysis, Cooley thought, it is certainly one of its consequences. Driving every mind along the same channel of inquiry, quantitative methods standardize outlook among those incapable of forming an outlook of their own.

Cooley's beliefs may be understood better if approached through the distinction between cultivation and training. Cultivation is concerned with the development of talent; the object of training is the development of skill. It is on talent, not skill, that qualitative methods make their heaviest demands. Cooley elucidates this idea when he confesses: "I have not been notably successful in 'organizing research.' That is, I have not developed a line of study wherein, under my direction, men of mediocre

talents could achieve substantial results." By contrast, "a man with any real gift for research will provide the interest and the initiative himself, on some hint that he gets from study or observation, and will need only encouragement and guidance as to where to find what he wants." It is no surprise, therefore, that Cooley rejected most of his admiring graduate students, preferring undergraduate teaching to the supervision of theses and dissertations.

If Cooley fails to distinguish himself as a cultivator of talent, few of us do much better. The difficulties he associated with qualitative methods instruction still confuse and perplex us. One can quickly teach students how to perform a significance test but not to capture the patterns in a non-numerical field. In every instance, violation of standard procedure is correctable; weakness of insight is not.

Qualitative observation remains a hopelessly private enterprise. Having at one's disposal the same data and using the same methods, one can replicate a survey directly. But after a year in the same Italian neighborhood in Boston or a Shetland resort hotel, one could never replicate the "findings" of Whyte and Goffman. Their model, after all, is not the laboratory worker taking reproducible measurements, but the literary artist or critic offering nonreproducible impressions.

Because of its heavy reliance on intuition and perceptiveness, one is bound to admit that if qualitative inquiry includes much of the best sociology has to offer, it also includes much, if not most, of the worst. Cooley's point is simply that qualitative observations resist technique. Their objects, it is true, allow for reliable coding, but penetration of their meaning requires the exercise of an intelligence which is, in important respects, non-methodical.

The contrasts just discussed—the speculative vs. the disciplined attitude, diversity vs. uniformity of vision, cultivation of talent vs. training, the unique vs. the replicable observation—are the elements Cooley uses to differentiate qualitative and quantitative thinking. Obviously, the first attributes in these pairs are not monopolized by qualitative sociologists; they also go into the making of good historians, philosophers, and literary scholars. What, then, can be said about the integrity of our discipline? Certainly a separatist faction in sociology favors the prospect of two intellectual cultures, one humanistic; the other, scientific. Cooley would have been sympathetic to this separatist cause, but it is sufficient for us, today, to recognize the issue itself, namely, whether or not the gap between quantitative and qualitative research, between two disciplinary cultures, is bridgeable.