Paradigms

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Paradigms are perhaps one of the most contested terms in qualitative research. While some authors and methodologists use the term to denote a set of methods or methodologies (Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003), others claim that the term has many uses. Some authors point out that Thomas Kuhn, who brought the term into common usage in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), himself used the term in over 25 different ways. Kuhn's general thesis was that paradigms were dominant theories or models by which science proceeded, until they were overtaken and superseded by newer and more encompassing theories or models, or both. Rohmann (1999: 295) defines paradigm as "An ideal or archetypal pattern or example that provides a model to be emulated." A preference here, however, is the definition provided by Reese (1980) and adopted by Lincoln and Guba (1985: 15): "a *set* of basic or metaphysical beliefs … sometimes constituted into a *system of ideas* that 'either give us some judgment about the nature of reality, or a reason why we must be content with knowing something less than the nature of reality, along with a method for taking hold of whatever can be known' [Reese 1980: 352]."

The distinction between definitions of paradigms as sets of methods or methodologies, and a definition which encompasses an entire set of ideas based on sets of fundamental or metaphysical beliefs, is a crucial one. In general, methods can be utilized in the service of any set of beliefs to a greater or lesser extent. Sets of metaphysical beliefs, however, are rarely transferable (in the same way methods might be deployed and redeployed), nor do they readily mix with other beliefs which are contradictory. That is, sets of beliefs tend to exhibit internal coherence and resonance. For this reason, discussions of paradigms as metaphysics of science tend to involve discussions of ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (theories of knowing and theories surrounding the nature of the relationship between knower and to-be-known), axiology (theories regarding what is considered *good* and what constitutes an appropriate *aesthetics* for a project or regime), and methodology (or implied best procedures for coming to know). Increasingly, paradigm theorists also discuss teleology, or the explanation of things according to their ends or purposes, or, in ethics, explanations in terms of consequences. Thus, for instance, researchers could speak of the portraits of the poor provided by social scientists of the l960s and l970s as having been captured by the political Right, and twisted to its own purposes, including the caricaturing of poverty, welfare recipients, racial and ethnic minorities, and the like (Fine et al. 2000).

Paradigms are important to qualitative research because they perform two critical functions. First, they signal that qualitative methods are being deployed in the service of a paradigm which is an alternative to conventional, experimental, or positivist research. Most often, the alternative paradigm is refered to as phenomenological, interpretive, ethnographic, constructivist, or naturalistic. Unlike conventional research, the goal of such research is neither prediction nor control, but rather explanation, deep understanding of some social phenomenon (*verstehen*), or the creation of a *pattern theory*, or all three. Pattern theories are more likely to emerge from interpretive, phenomenological, or ethnographic inquiry because pattern theories, unlike hypothetico-deductive theories, rarely specify cause-effect chains in variables (factors). Rather, pattern theories theorize motifs, arrangements, or representations of phenomenal elements that appear to be regularized or routinized in their propinquity to each other (Kaplan 1964). For example, less-than-robust health indicators are frequently seen in conjunction with poverty. It is likely that poverty itself does not cause ill health, but rather that other indicators closely aligned with poverty conditions – substandard housing, limited access to adequate health care, the paucity of high-quality nutritional support, and the like – work together to bring about the high incidence of chronic health problems among the desperately

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poor. Poverty itself is not a causative agent, but rather signals a constellation of factors that often work together to form a pattern of health relative to poverty.

Second, paradigms serve to create "cognitive economy," as Patton (1978) and others have explained. Paradigms are worldviews, entire philosophical systems for guiding how inquirers think about reality and how reality might be broken down, understood, or investigated. Paradigms are simultaneously both evocative (suggesting how one might conceive of some phenomenon or reality) and normative, specifying legitimate and reasonable means of exploring that reality which would be understood and assented to by other inquirers exploring the same reality. Paradigms serve as both metaphysical and methodological frameworks for socializing practitioners into their respective disciplines, and consequently, disciplinary practitioners will understand some portions of their own paradigms well and other portions may remain intuitive. Paradigms are cognitively efficient because, once adopted, they abrogate the necessity of epistemological or methodological debates each time new disciplinary problems present themselves for investigation.

Paradigms have substantial "staying power" and as a result are shifted only when evidence becomes compelling or overwhelming that a new paradigm is more useful. Practitioners of a given paradigm have typically arrived at some cognitive peace with themselves regarding what they believe regarding what is real, and what can be known about what is real, and are able to frame inquiries which conform to those fundamental, basic beliefs. As Patton points out, this is both the strength and the weakness of paradigms: a strength because it enables action without further metaphysical debate, and a weakness because the paradigm's "version of reality tends to become ingrained, influencing the very choice of questions deemed worthy of study, the methods used to study those questions, and the interpretations of the results" (Rohmann 1999: 296).

Because paradigms represent sets of foundational beliefs, they tend to persist over time in individuals as well as disciplines. They frequently represent both disciplinary commitments and the kinds of questions that adherents believe to be important for social science investigations. A plurality of paradigms is likeliest to provide the richest social science; the question is not which paradigm is best suited to science, but rather which paradigm exhibits the best fit with the kinds of questions being posed.

SEE ALSO: Aesthetics; Constructionism; Epistemology; Kuhn, Thomas and Scientitic paradigms; Positivism; Qualitative Methods

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