Guest Editors’ Introduction to the Special Issue: Best Papers from the Qualitatives 2010

Over a quarter of a century ago in 1984, Robert Prus and colleagues organized the first Canadian Qualitative Analysis Conference. ‘The Qualitatives’ as it has become affectionately known, originally focused on symbolic interactionist and ethnographic research on the topic of deviant behavior. This conference soon expanded significantly, including many other substantive areas of research while maintaining an emphasis on interactionist scholarship. The Qualitatives soon developed a strong reputation as a place for focused but friendly meetings of top Canadian but also North American and international researchers. The conference has become a place where young scholars and students can develop their research and presentation skills in a safe and welcoming environment alongside more veteran scholars. We emphasize intellectually stimulating exchanges within a friendly community of scholars, mixing engaging paper sessions with fun social events. We are very proud of this warm, friendly and inviting atmosphere, which is so important in building supportive research networks among qualitative researchers, and encouraging and mentoring younger scholars through informal means.

As the conference started to move across different parts of Canada and into the United States, we invited more keynote, plenary, and featured speakers to attend. Over just the past five years, the conference has hosted internationally known scholars such as Patricia Adler, Peter Adler, Kathy Charmaz, Adele Clarke, Mary Jo Deegan, Gary Alan Fine, Christine Hine, Rolf Linder, and Laurel Richardson. We have also attracted a wide range of editors to represent well-regarded scholarly journals, including The American Sociologist, The Sociological Quarterly, Symbolic Interaction, Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior, Qualitative Sociology Review, and of course, the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography. This allows us to attract many...
more international attendees to the conference (in 2010 we had presenters from Canada, USA, Mexico, Britain, France, Germany, Norway, Poland, Australia and Hong Kong). Over time, with the growing acceptance of qualitative methodologies throughout academia, the conference now welcomes a wider variety of qualitative methods and disciplines beyond sociology (e.g., criminology, anthropology, nursing, education, health studies, legal studies, mass communication, science and technology studies, journalism, geography and history). Perhaps Jacqueline Low and Will van den Hoonard have said it best: “what began as a conference to provide a supportive environment during a period of intellectual hostility became a conference dedicated to celebrating qualitative research in its many forms.”

In 2010, we had the honour of acting as two of the three organizers of the 27th Annual Canadian Qualitative Analysis Conference, held at Wilfird Laurier University, Brantford Campus, Ontario, Canada. Our objectives were four-fold: (1) to question and reflect on theoretical changes and challenges to the social pragmatist roots of the Chicago school, hoping to explore how pragmatism has grown and evolved, and how it might help inform ethnographic/qualitative research; (2) to continue the conference’s enduring objective of nurturing novice qualitative researchers; (3) to foster a positive research culture that celebrates, values, and rewards the utility of qualitative inquiry; and, (4) to highlight the interdisciplinary nature of qualitative research. The conference focused on theoretical changes and debates occurring within social pragmatism as a foundation for qualitative research, highlighted by a keynote address from Dr. Neil Gross. We also explored how these changes are reflected within empirically based research areas, and featured a number of topical subthemes, each led by a featured speaker. We invited Jeff Ferrell to speak about Crime, Deviance and Social Control; Park Doing on Knowledge, Science and Technology; Joseph Kotarba on Media and Entertainment; Stephan Timmermans on Health and Illness; and William Shaffir on Doing, Writing and Publishing Qualitative Research.

One of the major highlights of the 2010 Qualitatives conference was that the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography kindly agreed to publish a special issue of the best papers. Being recognized by JCE in this way is a major testament to the quality of papers consistently produced at these Canadian conferences. We received an enthusiastic response to our call for papers. We had the tough task of sorting through the more than 20 papers submitted for this special issue to find which were suitable to be sent out for full peer review; only some of these would progress through the editorial process and eventually make it into print in this special edition. The articles in this issue showcase the versatility and utility of ethnographic methods for studying diverse
aspects of social life, and show the kind of creative, imaginative work that is so often showcased at our conference. We provide a brief introduction of the papers in the following.

First, Orlee Hauser’s article, “We Rule the Base because we’re Few: Lone Girls in Israel’s Military,” is an excellent, in-depth account of how women serving in the Israeli military conceive of their identity and role in relation to the male majority, and how they narrate their gendered experiences and expectations. The lone women serving are pushed into traditional gendered roles based on the logic of the organizational structure, since they are placed intentionally to serve a traditional feminine role for the male culture of the base. By filling this role, however, the women found that they were able to win positive attention from their male counterparts and gain certain privileges as a result. While the women interviewed did not see this as especially problematic, the author considers the broader macro-institutional basis of this, arguing that women’s position in the military over the long term is weakened as a result of these processes. The result is a sobering and realistic portrayal of how gender is institutionalized in the context of the Israeli military, how this is viewed and strategically used by the women, and what this means for wider issues of gender inequity.

Second, Kate Rossiter’s and Rebecca Godderis’s article, “Finding the Necessary Distance: Theorizing Ethnographic Based Theatre,” uses the case study of a 1918 influenza pandemic to construct a play based on characters’ views and conversations about the role of race, class and gender in dangerous health crises in two separate time periods. The case is presented in order to challenge traditional presentations of ethnographic/historical information and argue for the benefits of a more performance-based presentation and analysis. The argument is that by developing a creative dramatization based on real historical events, the audience watching the play is able to better engage with the complex social issues at stake. Instead of presenting a “realist” account of the issues, a creative, fictionalized account, juxtaposed across two historical periods (1918 and the present), provides the viewer/reader with the distance and “mimesis” that allows for a more constructive social dialogue about contemporary health concerns.

Third, Staci Newmahr’s piece, “Chaos, Order and Collaboration: Toward a Feminist Conceptualization of Edgework,” provides an ethnographically rich paper on a Sadomasochism community, Caeden, which contributes novel insights regarding edgework, risk and gender. In this piece, Newmahr eloquently and analytically illustrates the collaborative construction of risk and skill that expands our theoretical understanding of edgework from an individual experience to that of a social experience that is achieved in and
constituted through social action. Through thick description of her “play” in Caeden, Newmahr illustrates how members of this deviant and stigmatized subculture engage in emotional edgework. By focusing on the emotional edge of SM, Newmahr moves beyond a description of the emotions that accompany edgework to a theoretical expansion and elaboration of the edgework model.

We would like to thank co-editors Kent Sandstrom, Marybeth Stalp, and the very helpful administrative staff at JCE for their help and support throughout this process, through answering questions, giving advice, and ensuring that this issue would be first rate. We believe that it is. We are very pleased to have our conference recognized by such an important journal, but are equally happy to give the conference goers, particularly up and coming scholars, a chance to publish here. Finally, we encourage the readers of JCE to consider attending the Canadian Qualitatives in the future, and help continue our tradition of supporting, valuing and celebrating the utility of ethnographic and qualitative research.

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