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# Criteria Against Ourselves

Arthur P. Bochner

University of South Florida, [abochner@usf.edu](mailto:abochner@usf.edu)

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# Criteria Against Ourselves

Arthur P. Bochner  
*University of South Florida*

*In the social sciences, we usually think of criteria as culture-free standards that stand apart from human subjectivity and value. The author argues in this article, however, that conflicts over which criteria to apply usually boil down to differences in values that are contingent on human choices. The demand for criteria reflects the desire to contain freedom, limit possibilities, and resist change. Ultimately, all standards of evaluation rest on a research community's agreement to comply with their own humanly developed conventions. The author ends by considering the personal standards that he applies to works that fall under the new rubric of poetic social science.*

When Laurel Richardson invited me to contribute to this conversation about judging “alternative” modes of qualitative and ethnographic inquiry, I consented reluctantly. Too often, I have seen discussions about criteria deteriorate into unproductive conflicts revolving around differences in values that cannot be resolved. The word *criteria* itself is a term that separates modernists from postmodernists, foundationalists from antifoundationalists, empiricists from interpretivists, and scientists from artists. It is not that one side thinks judgments have to be made and the other side does not. Both agree that inevitably they make choices about what is good, what is useful, and what is not. The difference is that one side believes that “objective” methods and procedures can be applied to determine the choices we make, whereas the other side believes these choices are ultimately and inextricably tied to our values and our subjectivities.

The differences of which I speak are not unreasonable, but they are unresolvable. As Richard Rorty (1982) says, these are not issues to be settled, but differences to be lived with. Until we recognize these differences as a reflection of incommensurable ways of seeing, we cannot begin to engage in meaningful conversation with each other. Thomas Kuhn (1962) observed more than 35 years ago that there is no paradigm-free way of looking. When our ways of looking are incommensurable, we can look in the same places, at the same things, and see them differently. Given each side's belief in its own premises—its own way of seeing—and recognizing that validity depends largely



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upon belief, we should not be surprised to find that when we converse about issues such as criteria our positions harden, conflicts escalate, and alienation increases. The different sides want to compel a universal, moral commitment to research practices that replicate their own, and each side gets frustrated when it confronts the plurality of the field and the impossibility of fixing a single standard for deciding the good and right purposes, forms, and practices of social inquiry.

I have a strong desire to create new and more interesting ways to talk about the work that many of us are doing under the rubric of alternative ethnography. Frankly, I find most of the incessant talk about criteria to be boring, tedious, and unproductive. Why do we always seem to be drawn back to the same familiar questions: "How do you know?" "Which methods are the right ones to use?" "What criteria should be applied?" For most of my academic life—almost 30 years—I have been baffled by this obsessive focus on criteria. In the social sciences, we have never overcome our insecurities about our scientific stature. In our hearts, if not in our minds, we know that the phenomena we study are messy, complicated, uncertain, and soft. Somewhere along the line, we became convinced that these qualities were signs of inferiority, which we should not expose. It appeared safer to keep the untidiness of our work to ourselves, rather than run the risk of having our work belittled as "unscientific" or "unscholarly." We seem uncommonly neurotic in our fear of having our little secret discovered, so we hide behind the terminology of the academic language games we've learned to play, gaining some advantage by knowing when and how to say "validity," "reliability," "grounded," and the like. Traditionally, we have worried much more about how we are judged as "scientists" by other scientists than about whether our work is useful, insightful, or meaningful—and to whom. We get preoccupied with rigor, but are neglectful of imagination. We hold on to the illusion that eventually we will unanimously agree on the culture-free standards to which all evidence must appeal, so that we won't have to rely on our own "subjectivity" to decide. Criteria pose as something beyond culture, beyond ourselves and our own conventions, beyond human choice and interpretation when, of course, they are not. Sometimes I feel that criteria are the very means we ourselves created to contain our desire for freedom and experience, a way of limiting our own possibilities and stifling our creative energy. I wonder, what is it we are not talking about when we are talking about criteria? Instead of asking, how can this be true? we could ask, what if this were true? What then?

When we say "alternative," as in "alternative ethnography," we are implying that a domain of inquiry exists to which the work in question can be contrasted or compared. In ordinary discourse, an alternative represents an option or a substitute. But in qualitative research, alternative ethnography has evolved more as an alteration or transformation than an alternative—a change in form as well as in purpose. Although we may call it "alternative," what we really intend is "alterative." In alternative ethnography, the differences become akin to a "counterculture," which is a meaning that often is

attributed to “new” and “alternative” ethnographies. Often alternative ethnography is discussed as if it were counter to traditional ethnographic realism or empiricism. The result is an emphasis on differences. But whether you consider “alternative” ethnographies threatening or profound, I think there are some premises on which all of us can agree.

### AREAS OF AGREEMENT

First, no single, unchallenged paradigm has been established for deciding what does and does not comprise valid, useful, and significant knowledge.

Second, there is no one right way to do social science research. Fields such as sociology, communication research, anthropology, and psychology may be thought of as cultural sciences that constantly are evolving. No authority has yet been established for reaching a definitive conclusion that *x* field of social science must be or do *y*. The history of each of these fields suggests that they can and do change. The argument, for example, that sociology must always do *y* because it always has done *y* is without foundations to support it.

Third, it is impossible to fix a single standard for deciding the good and right purposes, forms, and practices of ethnography. This has been tried before without notable success.

Fourth, alternative ethnography reflects a desire to do meaningful, significant, and valuable work. Alternative ethnographers usually want to produce interesting, innovative, and evocative texts, works that seek to nurture the imagination not kill it.

Fifth, the existence of alternative ethnography does not signal an end to all traditional or conventional inquiry. Alternative ethnography only extends our understanding of and commitment to the multiplicity and plurality of legitimate goals for social science inquiry.

Sixth, multiplicity of goals implies multiplicity in standards of evaluation as well. When there is no agreement on goals, there can be no agreement on the terms by which those goals can be judged as successfully or unsuccessfully achieved. To understand how to evaluate the extent to which goals have been achieved, one must acknowledge and understand the meanings of those goals.

The differences in goals between “alternative” and traditional ethnographic and qualitative inquiry inevitably brings us to areas of disagreement, perhaps even contentiousness.

### AREAS OF DISAGREEMENT

First, when traditional, empiricist standards are used to point out the failings of new or alternative ethnographies, as in, where are the hypotheses? the data analyses? the findings? these standards end up sounding parochial, narrow, and downright silly (Freeman, 1993).

Second, the notion that disciplines can be meaningfully distinguished by virtue of their possessing distinctive methods and discrete subject matters is false and misleading. No ontological basis exists for drawing a line between newspaper articles, novels, and sociological research studies (Rorty, 1982). The differences can only be drawn by reference to practical matters and to arbitrary, not empirical, stipulations.

Third, alternative ethnography is a blurred genre of discourse in which investigators are liberated to shape their work in terms of its own necessities rather than according to received ideas about what must be done (Geertz, 1980).

Fourth, we should never insist on reaching agreement beforehand on the criteria to which all arguments, reasoning, and conclusions must appeal. Ultimately, all criteria serve a conservative and destructive function. In Rorty's (1982, p. xli) terms, they are "temporary resting places constructed for specific utilitarian ends . . . a criterion . . . is a criterion because some social practice needs to block the road of inquiry, halt the regress of interpretations, in order to get something done." In this sense, criteria always have a restrictive, limiting, regressive, thwarting, halting quality to them, and they can never be completely separated from the structures of power in which they are situated.

Fifth, criteria are not found; they are made. Criteria refer to something we establish. Sample sizes, significance tests, alpha levels—what are these? No matter how real, natural, or objective they may seem, criteria are social products created by human beings in the course of evolving a set of practices to which they (and we) subsequently agree to conform (Rorty, 1982). In the final analysis, under the heading criteria, what we are talking about always boil down to compliance with our own conventions. The whole issue of criteria ends up rather pitifully as little more than an attempt to reach for some source outside ourselves to arbitrate differences of opinion, protect against subjectivity, and guarantee rationality (Rorty, 1982).

The conclusion I draw from the above is that conversations focusing on criteria have as their subtext a tacit desire to authorize or legislate a preexisting or static set of standards that will thwart subjectivity and ensure rationality. I consider this a potentially destructive endeavor insofar as it takes us away from the ethical issues at the heart of our work, distracting us from the difficult dilemma of figuring out how to keep the conversation going without invalidating the important differences that separate us, so that we can imagine and create new and better ways of living in this world.

## ALTERNATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC AND QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Enter narrative and what may now be called poetic social science, which represents one, not all, of the multiple forms and purposes of alternative eth-

nography. Ivan Brady (1991) calls the integration of anthropology and literature "art-ful science," where the beauty and tragedy of the world are textually empowered by the carefully chosen constructions and subjective understandings of the author. Here is how I see this work.

First, these are usually, but not always, narratives of the self. To a large extent, these self-narratives involve looking back at the past through the lens of the present. Given the ambiguous and open-ended quality of experience, stories give a measure of coherence and continuity that was not available at the original moment of experience. Too often, critics have seized upon this quality of personal narrative as cause to condemn the distortions of narrative, an argument that is, as Mark Freeman (1998) points out, parasitic on an empiricist account of reality. The charge of distortion is inextricably tied to the possibility of undistortion, a getting to the true bottom of things that we now recognize as untenable.

Second, the purpose of self-narratives is to extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived. These narratives are not so much academic as they are existential, reflecting a desire to grasp or seize the possibilities of meaning, which is what gives life its imaginative and poetic qualities. The call of narrative is the inspiration to find language that is adequate to the obscurity and darkness of experience. We narrate to make sense of experience over the course of time. Thus, narrative is our means of fashioning experience in language. Narrative is true to experience in the sense that experience presents itself in a poetic dimensionality saturated with the possibilities of meaning, however perishable, momentary, and contingent.

A poetic social science does not beg the question of how to separate good narrativization from bad, though it may be more open than other views to diverse answers to the question. The simple answer provided by writers such as Freeman (1998) is that the good ones help the reader or listener to understand and feel the phenomena under scrutiny. But things are rarely that simple, so let me say what helps me understand and feel with a story, when I am asked to make such a judgment.

First, I look for abundant, concrete detail; concern not only for the commonplace, even trivial routines of everyday life, but also for the flesh and blood emotions of people coping with life's contingencies; not only facts but also feelings. Second, I am attracted to structurally complex narratives, stories told in a temporal framework that rotates between past and present reflecting the nonlinear process of memory work—the curve of time. Third, I almost always make a judgment about the author's emotional credibility, vulnerability, and honesty. I expect the author to dig at his or her actions and underneath them, displaying the self on the page, taking a measure of life's limitations, of the cultural scripts that resist transformation, of contradictory feelings, ambivalence, and layers of subjectivity, squeezing comedy out of life's tragedies. Fourth, I prefer narratives that express a tale of two selves; a believable journey from who I was to who I am, a life course reimagined or

transformed by crisis. Fifth, I hold the author to a demanding standard of ethical self-consciousness. I want the writer to show concern for how other people who are part of the teller's story are portrayed, for the kind of person one becomes in telling one's story, and to provide a space for the listener's becoming, and for the moral commitments and convictions that underlie the story. Sixth, and finally, I want a story that moves me, my heart and belly as well as my head; I want a story that doesn't just refer to subjective life, but instead acts it out in ways that show me what life feels like now and what it can mean.

I am not bothered when a story borders on the pornographic because, as Laurie Stone (1997, xvii) says, "perhaps every story worth telling . . . is a dare, a kind of pornography, composed of whatever we think we're not supposed to say, for fear of being drummed out, found out, pointed out." To a certain extent, we have to work to overcome our conditioned fears of erotic knowledge. Too often, personal narratives are demeaned as some sort of victim art or confessional. What we miss when we react too quickly that way is how narrative is used as a source of empowerment and a form of resistance to counter the domination of canonical discourses. Often, the expressed purpose is to devictimize the stigmatized identity, to confirm and humanize tragic experiences by bearing witness to what it means to live with shame, abuse, addiction, or bodily dysfunction and to gain agency through testimony (Couser, 1997).

Overall, I don't find these judgments difficult to make. Philip Lopate (1994, p. xlv) refers to the personal essay as basic research on the self that ends up as, in his words, "a mode of being. It's not science; it's not philosophy. It's an existential struggle for honesty and expansion in an uncertain world." Robert Coles (1989) asks, "How to encompass in our minds the complexity of some lived moments in life?" His answer: "You don't do that with theories. You don't do that with a system of ideas. You do it with a story."

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*Arthur P. Bochner is professor of communication and codirector of the Institute for Interpretive Human Studies at the University of South Florida. He is coauthor of Understanding Family Communication (Allyn & Bacon) and coeditor of Composing Ethnography (AltaMira) and of the AltaMira book series on Ethnographic Alternatives. He has published more than 50 articles and monographs on close relationships, communication theory, and narrative inquiry in the human sciences. His current research explores ethnographic practices in the public domain, institutional depression in higher education, and love on the Internet.*