

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Qualitative Researchers as the Avant-Garde of Democratization: A Modest Proposal of a Sporting Analogy as Methodological Fiction

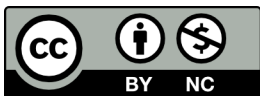
Journal Item

How to cite:

Hammersley, Martyn (2021). Qualitative Researchers as the Avant-Garde of Democratization: A Modest Proposal of a Sporting Analogy as Methodological Fiction. *Qualitative Inquiry* (Early Access).

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2021 Martyn Hammersley



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/10778004211015441>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

Qualitative Researchers as the Avant-Garde of Democratization: A Modest Proposal of a Sporting Analogy as Methodological Fiction

Qualitative Inquiry

1–2

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/10778004211015441

journals.sagepub.com/home/qix**Martyn Hammersley**¹ 

Abstract

A modest proposal of a sporting analogy is offered as methodological fiction about the democratization of research and the great mission such an ideal places upon qualitative inquiry. With apologies to Jonathan Swift.

Keywords

democratization, obligations of researchers, qualitative inquiry, sport

Increased democracy is required in all aspects of social life. Not only do people have an equal right to engage in political decision-making, irrespective of who they are, but also there must be equality of representation more broadly, across all social fields. In this spirit, it has been suggested that research must be democratized. This requires that members of marginalized and oppressed groups become researchers in place of those from privileged sectors of society. And this must surely be extended beyond blinkered restrictions: not just children but pedophiles; not just the victims of crimes but the criminals too; not just the subaltern but the fascists as well. On grounds of equality, all the disparaged must have representation. Of course, democratization demands even more than this: the very distinction between researcher and researched must be erased. It is a power relationship, and the fundamental principle—here as elsewhere—is that all differences in power should be eliminated. Powerlessness is the entitlement of all.

Yet it is the responsibility of researchers not only to advance the process of democratization in their own realm but also to do this in the fields they study. They should be the avant-garde, the storm troopers of the people. Take the study of sport as an illustration: there is much to be done in this field to achieve full democracy. A first requirement is that participation at the highest level of sports must be opened up to all, irrespective of personal characteristics. This includes differences in sporting ability, since the distribution of this is socially, and therefore unequally, determined. It is long overdue that a social model of disability be applied here. Those

with differing degrees of sporting ability must be able to compete on a level playing field; or, rather, one that is sufficiently tilted to allow those with less ability to have the same success as those with more. All necessary handicaps should be applied: such as knee-capping for those who are able to run faster than the rest of us.

But democratization must go still further: the very distinction between sports professionals and mere spectators should be abolished, since it is discriminatory. So, in team sports, the selection of players for each match would be made by the fans, not by head coaches or team managers, thereby undercutting the authority structures that currently prevail. A next move would be for the players actually to be selected *from* the fans, rather than there being professional teams. Fans could be elected or chosen by lottery to become players for a particular match. Indeed, the barriers between players and spectators might be broken down even further if, throughout the match, there were a continuous rotation of new players coming on to the field and others leaving after their allotted 15 minutes. Referees and other officials could also be elected or selected by lottery.

This is just an illustration of what would be possible in a particular field, one that is of great symbolic significance, shining the way forward for democratization in yet other

¹The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

Corresponding Author:

Martyn Hammersley, The Open University, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK.

Email: martyn.hammersley@open.ac.uk

areas, such as piloting airliners or brain surgery. It is the great calling of qualitative inquiry to remake the world in its own image.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Martyn Hammersley  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6842-6276>

Author Biography

Martyn Hammersley is Emeritus Professor of Educational and Social Research at The Open University, UK. He has carried out research in the sociology of education and the sociology of the media, but much of his work has been concerned with the methodological issues surrounding social enquiry. His books include (with Paul Atkinson) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (Fourth edition, Routledge 2019), *The Politics of Social Research* (Sage, 1995), *Reading Ethnographic Research* (Second edition, Longman 1997), *Questioning Qualitative Inquiry* (Sage, 2008), *The Limits of Social Science* (Sage, 2014), *The Radicalism of Ethnomethodology* (Manchester University Press, 2018), *The Concept of Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), and *Troubling Sociological Concepts* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020). Website: <http://martynhammersley.wordpress.com/>