The Science Fiction of Qualitative Inquiries

A Keynote Address for The Qualitative Report Conference

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Johnny Saldaña, Professor Emeritus, Arizona State University

[Due to copyright restrictions, transcripts of scenes from the showcased films cannot be included in the text.]

Let me first thank Adam Rosenthal and Ron Chenail for inviting me to speak and for coordinating this keynote address.

As you can see on the title screen, this talk includes a film clip from a title rated PG-13 for its scenes of violence.

In the science fiction film, *Minority Report*, the pre-crime police unit knows when murders are about to happen, and stop them before they occur. But how can people in the future predict the future? Through the help of three very special entities--the Precogs.

< a scene from *Minority Report* >

I am 61 years old, and though I claim no technological expertise, I can claim seniority as a qualitative researcher and somewhat confidently assert some possible forthcoming trends, even though I will attest throughout this address that you never know what the future holds. But I'm not predicting here like the Precogs from *Minority Report* as much as I'm relying on intuition. Intuition is a self-perception or feeling--a seemingly unexplainable cognition of that which is hidden or of something that is about to happen.

Psychologist Daniel Kahneman explains that human intuition is a "recognition" skill that is developed over time: "Valid intuitions develop when experts have learned to recognize familiar

elements in a new situation and act in a manner that is appropriate to it." In other words, pattern recognition, like the Precogs.

Intuition is all too easily discounted as a biased and unreliable researcher trait because it seems subjective and unscientific. But if intuition emerges from lived experiences and the ability to recognize familiar patterns in new contexts, it would seem to be an admirable quality necessary for investigation rather than a flawed attribute. Intuition is a sixth sense of sorts--the power of perceptive inference-making, coupled with the ability to reasonably predict future action based on those inferences. When it comes to relying on our own intuition, Kahneman advises us not to completely trust it, but not to dismiss it either.

I am a great fan of science fiction films and, in particular, stories about time travel and future worlds. As a theatre artist I enjoy the spectacle and special effects wizardry of filmmakers who can create intriguing designs and visual feasts for the eyes with computer graphics and light.

Science fiction is an extension of human fantasy, the product of our imaginative forays into unknown dimensions of time and space. These films are metaphors for our speculations--sometimes our fears--of what life may be like for future generations based on the ways we live now. They are both optimistic visions for a better world, and pessimistic nightmares of possible dystopias. They are adventure stories during our current time when risky adventures seem few and far between. And for the TQR conference theme, "the futures of qualitative inquiries," it seemed somewhat fitting to design a keynote address that intuits--not predicts--what qualitative research may be like in the near future.

Mark Maier, a leadership & organization studies researcher, posits: "If we can discern patterns, we increase our leverage for creating the future we desire because we are able to adapt to the patterns we identify. We can anticipate events before they occur and adjust our actions accordingly."

This really isn't too difficult, since a research study observed that humans, on average, think about the future or what happens next 59 times a day.

Futurists and inventors pose three questions to themselves when they speculate on visions for the world:

- What is possible?
- What is plausible?
- What is preferable?

"What is possible?" freely brainstorms the imaginative opportunities we have for new creations, the limitless options at our disposal for invention and innovation. This is free reign to plan in the best of all possible worlds.

"What is plausible?" brings the visionary back to reality, if you will. It considers the pragmatic matters we must all deal with, such as available time, finances, and human resources and motivation. It considers, given current trends in the world, that which will most likely occur.

"What is preferable?" is an ethical question, of sorts, for it speculates on what will be most beneficial for the public good, the greater good. But it is also an abductive way of thinking: of all the possibilities and plausibilities available, which ones will we choose or, in extreme cases, be forced to deal with?

Question One: What is possible?

The character of Alan Hakman is a "cutter"--a new profession in the science fiction drama, *The Final Cut*. In the future, humans can be implanted even before birth with memory devices in their brains that literally record their entire lives. Upon death, the implant is removed from the body and taken to a cutter, who reviews the human's life on a massive computer--affectionately nicknamed The Guillotine--and splices together a film tribute to play at the deceased's funeral or memorial service. But how does one reduce decades of a life into a short film in just a few days' time? The Guillotine automatically sorts and categorizes the recorded life by organizing millions

of recorded images for the cutter. It is then up to the cutter to make selective and artistic choices for the final tribute:

< a scene from *The Final Cut* >

It is possible that technology and computers may reach a level of sophistication and algorithmic prowess, like The Guillotine, that will enable them to take raw qualitative data and automatically analyze their contents into a highly organized array. But notice in the film clip that the computer is in service to the cutter, for it is the human that must still make the final choices as to what gets included in the tribute film. Books and manuals from qualitative software developers all attest that the software is merely an efficient storage, retrieval, and management system for data. The products do not automatically analyze the data for you--that is still the user's job.

Nevertheless, as Mister Spock did on *Star Trek*, I would love to be able have in the near future a massive, voice controlled computer in my home office and be able to tell it:

Computer: Analyze these transcripts phenomenologically.
Computer: Review these field notes and develop a grounded theory.
Computer: Conduct a content analysis of these five million Facebook posts.

Perhaps in the distant future, that may be possible. But I'd like to think that computers can only go so far, can only function so deep. Remember: in the science fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, it was a human who disabled the malfunctioning computer HAL after HAL determined that it knew what was best. Neuroscience has yet to understand fully how the human brain works. Theory posits that the computer is just an extension of the human brain. But if we can't at this point grasp and master an organ that's inside our bodies, how can we construct a computer that genuinely and independently thinks like us with sentience or consciousness? I blithely quip in my works, "A computer calculates the mean, but a qualitative analyst calculates meaning."

Though it may be stating the obvious, computer technology is currently evolving at a rapid pace. And the software that companies are developing for qualitative researchers demonstrates some

remarkable visual arrays and algorithms for queries. But as for *heuristics*, or methods of discovery, that's where the human mind comes in. Journal articles, methods books, and conference presentations will most likely still be written by human beings. Speech and text and visual representations created and chosen by the researcher are the most efficient and effective modes of communication we have going for us.

The acceleration of technology's capabilities sometimes amazes me, and sometimes scares me. Virtually any notions of online privacy and security I once had in my life are now eradicated. I am leery of the covert, digitally linked network of online culture, in which Facebook, Google, HuffPost, amazon.com, and other major online vendors all know and share with each other my reading habits, consumer preferences, and predict with sometimes alarming accuracy my innermost desires. But I smirk when they get it deliciously wrong. I posted on my Facebook page one day that I had just seen the Broadway musical, *The Book of Mormon*, and the next day there appeared an ad on my Facebook sidebar enticing me to go to a website where, as a gay man, I could hook up to meet hot single Mormon women.

Finally, for what is possible technologically, I intuit a future in which research methods books are malleable, fluid, and ever-evolving, just like the work we do. After a book of mine has been published and in print, I of course think of all these new things I wish I could have added in or changed, but I have to wait three to five years for the next edition to appear in print in order to make that happen. I'm willing to give up books in print if that means I can have an online book of mine that can change on a daily basis, if needed, with new information, new content, new references, revised material. Anyone accessing the site would have an up-to-date and state-of-the-art reference work. Of course, this raises a host of issues regarding copyright, citation accuracy, royalties, and consistency for reader access.

So, is anything possible? Yes, but not really. The phrase might be better worded as:

Question Two: What is plausible?

In the dystopic future of the United States, renamed Panem, the nation is divided into 12

districts. And once a year, as punishment for an earlier uprising and to regulate social unrest, two young people are chosen from each district as tributes to participate in the annual Hunger Games, where each one must fight to the death. In this scene, the 74th game begins.

< a scene from *The Hunger Games* >

Science fiction films are rife with violent scenes. Whether battling aliens, robots, or even fighting among ourselves on Earth for survival of the fittest, humans seem to always be fighting in the future with either state of the art weaponry, primitively with our bare hands, and sometimes with our minds.

The 1980s in research methodology were known as the decade of "the paradigm wars," when quantitative and qualitative inquirers battled it out in conference debates and scholarly journals with ontological and epistemological light sabers as to the validity and legitimacy of their respective approach's philosophical foundations and methodological robustness. Almost three decades later, we now see as strange bedfellows both quantitative *and* qualitative approaches blended together in a truce, of sorts, and labeled "mixed methods research," like some hybrid, genetically altered, fused life form engineered in a mad scientist's laboratory.

I posit that qualitative research is currently in a methodological hunger games, of sorts, in which our qualitative nation is divided into separate methods districts with tightly guarded borders. Post-structuralists over here, grounded theorists over there. Autoethnographers over here, case study researchers over there. Phenomonologists here, narrative inquirers there. Mixed methods researchers here, and arts based researchers way over there. And though we often come together at an annual conference reaping like this and smile graciously at each other in passing or at social events, some districts' tribes are fiercely territorial.

Look at conference programming and notice how some sessions are focused exclusively on a particular methodology behind closed doors. Perhaps there's nothing wrong with that in an era of specialization. But what's disturbing is how some tribes denigrate another tribes' ways of working. It's as if each methodological district, with its leaders as tributes, compete with one

another to the death to prove their epistemological superiority. Good researchers acknowledge that one approach may be more *appropriate* than another, given the nature and purpose of the specific inquiry or study. But to arrogantly assert paradigmatic, philosophical, or methodological dominance is eerily reminiscent of President Snow's tight grip on the nation.

I often shake my head at the needless boundary-making I sometimes observe, fuming in some conference sessions when their elitist presenters wearing white roses on their lapels counter my own value, attitude, and belief systems for research.

But this conference got it right when it themed itself "The Futures of Qualitative Inquir*ies*," for that title acknowledges the multiple and rhizomatic directions of our field today. We *are* what qualitative research *is*: a wide variety of approaches to and methods for the study of natural social life. The *Star Trek* series gave us hope for an optimistic future when the humans of Earth realized they were not alone in the universe. They give up their warlike tendencies and make the planet a beneficent culture for all its populace, using phaser force only when necessary to protect life.

Will there ever be a standardization of methodologies or methods in qualitative inquiry, as quantitative research has done? Will one analytic approach prove itself better than all others? I doubt it; it does not seem plausible, to me. Qualitative inquiry emerged at a time and is evolving in a time when standardization is suspect and antithetical to higher education faculty's ways of working. Our plurality, our methodological diversity, is most likely here to stay, despite those who would knock down other approaches and arrogantly claim that theirs is the "better" or "right way." Like *The Hunger Games*, people will revolt against centralized Capitol control. So, fair warning to those philosophical methodologists who wish to rule: "May the odds be ever in *your* favor." Or, as a current ethical meme making the rounds online says to us citizens, "Do no harm, but take no shit."

Question Three: What is preferable?

WALL*E is an Earth-bound, trash compacting robot that has followed Eve, another robot in

search of life, to the planet Axiom, where humans have been living for centuries in ignorant bliss under corporate rule by the Buy and Large company.

< a scene from *WALL*E* >

Some scholars have proclaimed in their writings "the death of theory," "the death of coding," "the death of method," and even "the death of data." These pronouncements of passing and their burial in the qualitative graveyard are premature. From what I read currently in journals and books, researchers are still working with data, still adhering to method, still coding, and still developing theories. Trends now in the field are to replace the word "data" with the term "empirical materials," and instead of analyzing them, we should "trouble" them. Well, you can put lipstick on a datum, but it's still a datum.

There's also this seemingly trendy if not annoying need of some scholars to discard what they believe doesn't seem to be working now and rebrand it with new approaches--a perverse need to fast forward to the future by tacking the "post-" prefix to what currently exists without trying to resolve the current version's glitches or to reflect on what the new name of their new approach should be. We are in far too many "post-" eras:

- post-positivist
- post-modernist
- post-structuralist
- post-colonial
- post-representation
- post-foundational
- post-human
- post-coding
- post-feminist
- post-apartheid
- post-Katrina
- post-9/11

- post-knowing
- post-theory
- post-qualitative

and even, yes, post-post-qualitative. Someone thought it clever to label our current era "Qualitative Research 2.0." Which, quite honestly, brings out the growling bear in me and makes me think, "*2*.0? We haven't even worked out the bugs yet for version *1*.0."

Evaluation researcher Michael Quinn Patton claims that in organizational evolution today, rapid change is the norm, not the exception. But I have seen the aftermath of changing too quickly at my own university--change in leadership that offered virtually no transition or voice from its constituents, and left a demoralized faculty, staff, and student body in its wake. Time is, yes, a relative construct, as Einstein put forth. Though some may tell me, "Johnny, you're moving too slow," I counter back with a scowl and say, "No, the problem is you're moving too fast."

It is reasonable to assert that each era has its own social tempos and cultural rhythms, and the rapid speed of technology today has accelerated our biological and physiological rates to such excess that acting fast is the norm, not the exception. Our brains operate neurologically at astonishing speeds, but we have not yet consciously evolved to synchronize with the digital processing speed of computers and other technology. And when our brains can't make sense or make meaning of data--or whatever you want to call it--they shut down in dissonance, they avoid, refuse, erase, and reject the current conditions, proclaim them a failure, and find a new paradigm that better harmonizes with their extant value, attitude, and belief systems. Now, true, to move forward as a species we need to acknowledge that which is not working and find better alternatives. But most often the solution is fixing the existing problem, not dismissing it and inventing a rose-colored label in hopes that the new brand will somehow transform or revolutionize our conception of existence.

Sometimes in my cranky-old-man moods I rail against the investment of our government's resources into exploring other worlds when we haven't even solved our own planet's problems. One would think that with the millennia of knowledge we've accumulated as a species that

humans would have figured out how to live productively and peacefully by now. But the citizens of the world have still not "gotten it right." There are too many unanswered questions about life; too many unsolved problems; and too many unresolved issues, especially in an era when "complexity," "messiness," "ambiguity," and "uncertainty" are recent buzzwords in selected philosophical approaches to inquiry.

Success in mass productivity is colloquially measured by whether you can make something faster, smaller, and/or cheaper. So, just for speculation, in what ways can qualitative research become smaller, faster, and/or cheaper?

In an era of extreme budget cuts to higher education, where intellectual capital seems demonized for not adhering to the prevailing political and moral sentiments of those in power, researchers, for the time being, must learn how to do their work with limited resources. I was raised in a culture of austerity, for my childhood was spent in a lower class upbringing, and in adulthood I became involved with K-12 education and theatre--two fields where extracurricular fundraising was the norm to meet day to day needs, and where we learned to do, not more with less, but what we needed to do with what we had. And perhaps that's what qualitative inquiry today needs to do as well. I'm not advocating qualitative research methods bake sales to raise money. For the immediate future, there may not be as many resources as we would like, so it behooves us to think about how we can still research but on modest scales. Smaller, faster, and/or cheaper.

Perhaps even more of our future research conferences might be held both synchronously and asynchronously, both live and fully mediated, in which hundreds if not thousands of researchers can sit at their office computers or with their laptops or iPhones and attend in real time several conference sessions in a day, broadcast over the Internet with future links or YouTube postings for access and downloads.

And if you don't have resources to study a large group, then study a case. If there are no travels funds to stay in the field for prolonged amounts of time, than explore what's freely available online. If you don't have funds to buy NVivo or Dedoose or ATLAS.ti or Quirkos software, then

use Word and Excel instead. If there's no time or money to study others, then study yourself autoethnographically as a culture of one.

But that smaller, faster, cheaper advice does come with some caveats. There's an unsettling foreboding of qualitative researchers finding the easy way out or, worse, becoming complacent, like the humans of the future on *WALL*E*'s planet Axiom. Instead of taking time to venture into the social world, spending months or even years in a field site talking with and observing people of other subcultures and microcultures, we'll stay locked in the comfort of our offices to compose autoethnographic selfies or to analyze data downloaded onto our hard drives in less than a minute.

Smaller, faster, cheaper. We read in certain research methods books that full interview transcriptions are no longer necessary. Finding the gist is what is most important for the study. There's no need to take extensive written field notes anymore. Just set up your iPad or iPhone to video record the real life unfolding before you and watch it later to find maybe five minutes of worthwhile footage. If we become too dependent on researching smaller, faster, and/or cheaper, then the quality of our work becomes smaller, faster, and, worse, cheaper. Instead, we need to make it *better*. Quality, not quantity.

What is preferable, to me, is a reinvigoration of our sense of adventure, our forays into unknown social worlds. Because as society evolves, new cultures and subcultures and microcultures and countercultures get formed and reformulated, birthing new planets for us to orbit around as participant observers and to collect mountains of data--or whatever you want to call it--for analysis.

What is preferable, to me, is a technology that is complex but not complicated to make qualitative data analysis more accessible to more users.

What is preferable, to me, is a qualitative research field that acknowledges that there is a diversity of methodologies and methods available to us for our inquiries, and that one approach is no better than another.

What is preferable, to me, is a seismic, qualitative mind-shift in which the social scientific community acknowledges that some aspects of human life cannot be reduced to statistical representations, but brought to significant meaning and clarity through stories, poetry, and artistic forms.

What is preferable, to me, is that scholars not get frozen in time with defeatist notions of data "complexity," "messiness," "ambiguity," and "uncertainty." The ideal purpose of research is to increase knowledge and to find solutions to our problems. It is our duty to advance the world, not to continually push its pause button. I acknowledge that time for reflection is necessary for the formulation of good ideas, but we are living in an age when the speed of our solutions must catch up with the accelerated accumulation of our dilemmas. Anyone can ask a question; it takes a sharp thinker to construct a good answer. And if we don't bother to seek the answers to the questions we pose, then we have no business calling ourselves qualitative researchers.

Closure

Spoiler alert: this scene is the climax of the film. In *Interstellar*, humans must try to save themselves from their dying planet by relocating to another world. In his futile search for that new planet, Astronaut Cooper finds himself in a tesseract, a five-dimensional construct that holds his past and present Earth life. He must somehow communicate with his physicist daughter, Murph, on how to save the human race.

< a scene from *Interstellar* >

The saying, "The best way to predict the future is to make it" is only partly true. To me, "You never know what the future holds." That's what I tell my students when they worry about whether they will ever find a job when they graduate from the university. That's what I tell one of my 35 year old friends when he worries if he'll ever find the right woman, get married, and have children. And that's what I tell myself when I lie in bed at night and worry, at age 61, how many years I have left on this earth. You never know what the future holds. And though some

people take proactive measures in the present to make their futures more secure--to control and predict it, as quantitative researchers are wont to do--uncertainty, idiosyncrasy, the unanticipated, and bad fortune have a way of messing up our best laid plans.

But, you never know what the futures hold! I am 61 years old and I have learned that there are also many wonderful surprises in a lifetime. New discoveries to be read in an article or book that completely change the way you work. Chance and fleeting exchanges with strangers that leave an indelible impression in your memory. Serendipitous connections with colleagues now who will play a significant role in your future. Awards that you worked hard for. Grants that make a dream project come true. Opportunities to write and publish, opportunities to travel, opportunities to present, opportunities to apply for jobs, opportunities to change people's lives in minor to major ways for the better through your research. You may not realize those moments when they happen in the present, but someone will come up to you 10 or 20 or 30 or even 40 years later and tell you a memory of what you once said to or did for them that made a significant impact on their lives in some way.

Someone's got to write that next epiphanic, paradigm-shifting breakthrough article or chapter or conference paper or textbook that revolutionizes the way qualitative researchers think, and that writer could be you. Science fiction is the product of our imaginations. Our futures are the products of our imaginations. Your work is the product of your imagination. And creativity. And agency. The futures are what you make of them, even if you never know what they hold in store.