


A STRONG CASE FOR SOFT SCIENCE

UM FORTE ARGUMENTO PARA AS CIÊNCIAS MOLES 

UN FUERTE ARGUMENTO A FAVOR DE LAS CIENCIAS BLANDAS 

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Abstract: In this essay, I reflect on Gastaldo and Eakin's Practising Soft Science in the Field of Health, where critical qualitative research is a methodology, with epistemological, axiological and theoretical underpinnings. I highlight the emerging key elements raised in the commentary, discussing the value that it contributes to creating an institutional presence for critical qualitative research in the health sciences. I draw attention to the invisible, often emotional, labor associated with this strategy while elaborating on the strengths of this approach. I argue that forming an aligned collective counters the dominant, positivist orientation in what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) calls "gladiator scholarship". Instead, it allows for exploring the locus of enunciation (Mignolo, 2009), laying inequities to bear. Through implementing these strategies, critical qualitative research has the potential to contribute to generative disruption by creating soft science that fuels social transformation.

Keywords: Health sciences. Qualitative research. Soft sciences. Epistemology.

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Gastaldo and Eakin's "*Practising Soft Science in the Field of Health*" (2024) provides an eloquent commentary, sharing insights into their experiences of embodying qualitative research in the health sciences. That is, in a world that tends to favour quantitative research paradigms. Their paper clearly articulates the challenges confronted by critical qualitative researchers. It illustrates the strategies and mechanisms adopted to challenge and contend with the structures and systems of dominance that sustain the "limited qualitative research literacy" and the prejudice of "scientism". In this paper, I begin by highlighting the key elements of their argument, offering my reflections and experiences of critical qualitative research in health sciences in South Africa.

1 INTRODUCTION

Drawing from their experience while establishing and developing the Centre for Critical Qualitative Health Research (CQ) at the University of Toronto, Gastaldo and Eakin offer several strategies for navigating and resisting the dominance of increasingly neoliberal academic environments. They contributed to intentionally building an institutional space for critical qualitative research in the health sciences. Developing this institutional presence involved establishing networks over time and working collectively, taking up numerous roles and opportunities to advance the critical qualitative research agenda and resist the hostile institutional environment. This was achieved through applying three overall strategies, namely, "doing science differently"; "utilizing qualitative methodologies with an explicit connection to social theories situated within the critical-social and interpretivist research paradigms" (Gastaldo; Eakin, 2024, p. 4) and "not only surviving, but thriving".

Acknowledging the limited literacy in qualitative research, the authors propose a systemic response, creating an institutional space for developing, supporting and sustaining critical qualitative research in health sciences. Critical Qualitative research was framed as a methodology, "an epistemological, axiological and theoretical perspective on knowledge production," distinct from methods, which refer to "techniques for collecting data and producing findings." Creating this space, they suggest, entailed redefining and reclaiming the concept of "soft science", advocating that practising soft science is an act of defiance that can promote critical scholarship. Doing this was made possible through intentionally adopting strategies that are out of the mainstream and courageously integrating these into research and teaching. Advancing qualitative research as a science benefited individual researchers and formed a community of like-minded researchers that created an institutional presence by unveiling its potency. The authors describe four focal areas that maintained their flow by invoking the metaphor of critical qualitative research travelling along a river's irregular, challenging edges, boundaries and shoreline. These focal areas contributed to the methodology of critical qualitative research becoming more recognized as credible in the health sciences and drawing it into conversation with existing positivist health science research.

Although the authors draw on their extensive experiences as research leaders, their narrative foregrounds the pivotal importance of collective contributions. Establishing a collective systematically orchestrated institutional presence and impact over a long period. Starting as a network investing in critical qualitative research eventually led to establishing a research centre. Over the years, the intentional growth was fueled by remaining steadfast to the truth value of qualitative research and disseminating knowledge on terms that reflected these values (Gastaldo; Eakin, 2024). The benefit of establishing a collective that worked from this principled approach included opportunities for co-producing publications and sets of guidelines that assisted with advancing qualitative researchers' careers and interdisciplinary work. The interdisciplinary nature of the collective's research provided broad exposure to qualitative research. By sharing their reflections on their work, the authors invite others to continue it, raising the possibilities for extending the supportive community of practice.

Practically implementing the critical orientation of the research is another strategy that advanced the transformative potential of qualitative research. Through methodological and conceptual innovations and knowledge mobilisation, the authors demonstrated that it is possible to challenge assumptions about health-related issues. They advocate that "new, meaningful ways of doing" emerge from critical qualitative research, which may influence health and healthcare. Capacity development for such critical research was advanced through investing in the next generation of qualitative researchers. This occurred through teaching, especially postgraduate courses and postgraduate research supervision, publishing guidelines and providing career opportunities that advanced critical qualitative inquiry. Knowledge generation was enhanced by creating accessible curriculum content, some translated into Portuguese. Disseminating knowledge beyond the anglophone community signals an active pursuit to broaden epistemic networks. This translation speaks into the inequities of knowledge distribution in all of science, including soft science.

Gastaldo and Eakin (2024) remind us that while these strategies support researchers to challenge many dominant assumptions about scientific research, critical qualitative research remains marginalised within universities. They illustrate that this is not a once off project. Instead, it is an ongoing commitment to balance the growth and creativity that emerges within this marginality, asserting the right to respect and recognition rather than integration or assimilation into the world of positivism that persists within the university. The strategies and insights the authors share are sorely needed, coming when the world faces increasing intolerance. The lure to conform to the more positivist or mixed methods paradigms of qualitative research may appear to be an attractive route for self-preservation in academia. Dominant neoliberal and managerial orientations to research disincentivise critical qualitative research, preferring paradigms that centre on numerical measures and measurement of impact. Competition for dwindling research funding has increased in neoliberal university environments, and this poses a threat to the continuity of critical qualitative research. This raised the question: Is there still a place for a principled, steadfast,

critically grounded stance? Gastaldo and Eakin invite us to embrace the challenge of surviving while offering hope for thriving as critical qualitative researchers.

2 CLAIMING VOICE AND POWER: SIDESTEPPING GLADIATOR SCHOLARSHIP

Gastaldo and Eakin (2024) offer persuasive suggestions for establishing an institutional presence for critical qualitative research. They provide a view into what needs to be done and the valuable transformative purpose it may serve. Many researchers in South Africa and Africa will resonate with the experience of the pervasive prejudice of the hierarchy in methods due to “scientism” (Gastaldo; Eakin, 2024, p. 2). In my experience with postgraduate students across disciplines in the health sciences, they already encounter this prejudice as they submit their proposals for institutional review. The questions raised often reflect the reviewers “limited literacy in qualitative science” (Gastaldo; Eakin, 2024). Queries include: Why is the problem framed using political constructs, isn’t this a bias? Suppose participants are deemed vulnerable, bearing in mind that this includes a large proportion of the South African population (Republic of South Africa, 2015). In that case, institutional reviewers often assume that such participants have limited agency. This often leads to delays in ethics approval as researchers must describe what additional protections will be implemented when paternalistic questions about protection emerge. Assumptions about vulnerability are made and agency is discounted. When applying biographical and narrative methods, honouring participants’ decisions and voices when they choose to reveal their identities are seen as risks even when participants are co-authors of biographical research. These questions, disguised as legitimate questions of methods, concern for safety and managing risk, reflect a disjuncture in epistemic orientation. Researchers are burdened with defending their critical qualitative research methodology, pressured to appease and navigate what often feels like an interrogation of their studies’ epistemological, theoretical and axiological basis. Conceptualising the research phenomena and problem using critical social theories and foregrounding relational and sociological factors influencing health is deemed problematic. Recognising and deconstructing these encounters within supportive networks assists with strategising about individual and institutional responses that resist these moves and grow the space for critical qualitative research. The hidden labour associated with doing this work is perhaps part of what Gastaldo and Eakin (2024) are alluding to in their statement that “it’s hard to be soft” (p. 9).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) uses the concept of gladiator scholarship to highlight the violence navigated as part of the invisible emotional and invisible labour of scholarship. He contends that positivism serves as a powerful foundation for gladiator scholarship and that “poking holes in another scholar’s work is privileged over seeking to understand what other scholars are providing”. Researchers pursuing an epistemology as gladiator scholars are “always ready to spill blood in pursuit of a particular epistemology” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). Decolonial scholarship, as an expression of critical theory, is less about serving an academic ego or affirming one’s view or paradigmatic stance. It invites a way of being that engages the human in the

research, rejecting the fight for domination and embracing reflexivity and an openness to listening and learning. It relies on humans interfacing between all aspects of their identities, politics and experiences into the research context. This builds a fertile space for knowledge generation. The strategy of creating spaces where scholars feel safe to resist gladiator scholarship and be open to new ways of knowing is another strategy that could contribute to sustaining critical qualitative research in the health sciences.

While Gastaldo and Eakin's (2024) strategies for intervening in the system of prejudice are encouraging, the emotional labour and work on multiple fronts is intense. Working as a collective is thus necessary for sustaining the creative energies and endurance needed to do this work. Thus, building networks and teams promoting critical qualitative research within universities depends on finding coherence and alignment between researchers and carefully reading how it is situated within the local and global institutional and broader political climates. The capacity to read the room, so to speak, adds another layer to the toll of the emotional labour. I feel compelled to offer a word of caution here: the shadow side of established collectives is the risk that they adopt the competitiveness of gladiators, undermining the aim of being inclusive of those who align with the critical qualitative research agenda. Closed, exclusive networks are often seen in the limited and elitist way that some consortia operate, attracting funding opportunities between themselves only. How the epistemic collective operates influences the approach to integrating critical qualitative research orientation into the daily work of teaching, grant writing, committee duties, and administration. The accompanying emotional labour occurs as an invisible part of daily work life. It is not only constrained to a research project but also requires relentless perseverance as the political negotiations are endless.

Locating the human as part of knowledge generation is situated within a broader geopolitical configuration of the world, where privilege is afforded to Eurocentric ways of being and knowing. Noticing this privileging reveals the influence of coloniality on the scholars – it means paying attention to who contributes to knowledge generation, how this occurs and, where you speak from, what Mignolo refers to as the locus of enunciation (Mignolo, 2009). The locus of enunciation recognises the geopolitical and body-political location from which one speaks. It questions the universality of what can and should become known, ways of knowing and who should be involved, allowing for epistemic freedom to emerge. In discussing the challenges and strategies used to advance critical qualitative research, the struggle with this locus of enunciation appears to be missing from the considerations suggested by Gastaldo and Eakin (2024). Expressions of coloniality that may occur within epistemic networks intending to advance critical qualitative research should be examined as an explicit part of creating an institutional space for critical qualitative research. Doing so would encourage ways of engaging that shift from singular notions of knowledge to embracing the plurality of knowledges. It creates opportunities for alternatives to hegemonic thinking and doing to emerge (Galvaan, 2021). It allows epistemic freedom to take hold, making the locus of enunciation visible and drawing on it to shape what counts as generating knowledge. This process, I would argue is part of the heartbeat of soft science and reflects epistemic and pragmatic shifts indicative of generative disruption (Galvaan,

2021) through scholarship as praxis. Generative disruption “requires scholars and practitioners to adopt an epistemic openness to the uncertainty of not having the immediate answers or solutions. An epistemic openness to not knowing is underpinned by an intention to change hegemonic practices through collectively striving for freedom” (Galvaan, 2021, p. 8) through doing. During generative disruption, humans bring themselves to the research and dualisms are displaced, allowing plurality to come to the fore and coloniality to be challenged.

Creating forums for collectives to meet and dialogue about assumptions underpinning critical theoretical orientations to qualitative research is a key part of the strategy that we have implemented to create an institutional space for this research. Here I am referring to formal opportunities for exchange, such as seminars and informal meeting spaces. For instance, we initiated a Talking Scholars space for researchers in the Department of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Cape Town. This space encouraged researchers to share their stories about their research with colleagues and generate critical insights into their work. Extending such spaces across institutions and disciplines is necessary. Researchers often have a sense of alignment with critical theories and a personal connection to the phenomenon they are studying, contributing to the emotional attachment to the research. This attachment may be recast from the positivist perception of bias to being richly productive, providing an opportunity to be an insider-outsider (Dwyer; Buckle, 2009). It purposefully grounds research and may contribute to identifying where the leverage points are for necessary change.

Notwithstanding, tensions are evoked when faced with scientism and the demand to defend critical qualitative research methodologies while resisting gladiator scholarship. These tensions make finding and articulating one’s voice as a researcher, especially without a support network/ network of like-minded individuals difficult. Finding a voice as a researcher in the face of interrogations by review panels and gladiator scholarship may contribute to interruptions and delays in research, including limiting research publications and dissemination. Developing, locating and becoming part of nurturing epistemic networks that are open to challenging unexamined assumptions and committed to building capacity resonates with the idea of building collective action that provides a distinct institutional home for the critical orientation to qualitative research and collaboration in the health sciences. Gastaldo and Eakin’s invitation to walk the tightrope, keeping the balance between taking up institutional space and working in defiance from and in the margins, illustrates a move beyond the dualistic binaries associated with quantitative research paradigms.

The contributions of networks and collectives that share a critical qualitative research purpose draw attention to the opportunities to nurture alliances and understand the discursive processes that shape the work of Indigenous scholars everywhere and research in and of the Global South. The nuances of these discursive processes in different contexts, given the different political, historical and social structures and processes, have to be factored into how researchers and participants work together (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2024). Learning from experiences and practices in the Global South is important for mutual knowledge exchange and beneficial research collaborations.

This may strengthen the global epistemic network of critical qualitative research, deconstructing universal knowledge to enable situated knowledge production. Critical Qualitative Research then speaks back to the dominance by side-stepping what may appear to be a dualistic competition between paradigms. It delinks from discourses that tend to justify the legitimacy of an approach. Thriving rather than only surviving (Gastaldo; Eakin, 2024) is demonstrated by the growth of critical qualitative research, not merely by its continued existence.

3 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I appreciate the reflective space that the controversial topics section of *Movimento* introduces. Gastaldo and Eakin's (2024) controversial topic commentary unveils strategies to circumnavigate the existing dominance in academic research and the normative character of science.

I close by turning to the literary art of Don Mattera, a South African writer, journalist, editor and poet renowned for his anti-apartheid activism. Mattera penned a poem when his comrades were persecuted during the height of apartheid in South Africa. I share this poem as a reflection of the power of soft science and the threat with which it may be perceived. This threat may fuel gladiators to instil fear as they pursue the erasure of ideas emerging from critical theoretical orientations. Long live the resolute commitment of the researcher to sustain critical qualitative research.

The poet must die – Don Mattera (1983)

*The poet must die
her murmuring threatens their survival
her breath could start the revolution;
she must be destroyed*

*Ban her
Send her to the Island
Call the firing-squad
But remember to wipe her blood
From the wall,
Then destroy the wall
Crush the house
Kill the neighbours*

*If their lies are to survive
The poet must die*

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Resumo: Neste ensaio, reflito sobre o artigo de Gastaldo e Eakin *Practising Soft Science in the Field of Health*, em que a pesquisa qualitativa crítica é uma metodologia, com fundamentos epistemológicos, axiológicos e teóricos. Destaco os elementos-chave emergentes levantados no comentário, discutindo o valor que ele contribui para criar uma presença institucional para a pesquisa qualitativa crítica nas ciências da saúde. Chamo a atenção para o trabalho invisível, muitas vezes emocional, associado a essa estratégia, ao mesmo tempo em que discuto os pontos fortes dessa abordagem. Argumento que a formação de um coletivo alinhado contraria a orientação positivista dominante no que Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) chama de “academia de gladiadores”. Em vez disso, ela permite explorar o locus da enunciação (Mignolo, 2009), trazendo à tona as desigualdades. Por meio da implementação dessas estratégias, a pesquisa qualitativa crítica tem o potencial de contribuir para a disrupção generativa, criando uma ciência mole que alimenta a transformação social.

Palavras-chave: Ciências da saúde, Pesquisa qualitativa, ciências moles, epistemologia.

Resumen: En este ensayo, reflexiono sobre el artículo de Gastaldo y Eakin *Practicing Soft Science in the Field of Health*, donde la investigación cualitativa crítica es una metodología con fundamentos epistemológicos, axiológicos y teóricos. Destaco los elementos clave emergentes planteados en el comentario, discutiendo el valor que aporta a la creación de una presencia institucional para la investigación cualitativa crítica en las ciencias de la salud. Llamo la atención sobre el trabajo invisible, a menudo emocional, asociado con esta estrategia, al tiempo que elaboro sobre los puntos fuertes de este enfoque. Sostengo que formar un colectivo alineado contrarresta la orientación dominante y positivista en lo que Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) llama “academia de gladiadores”. En cambio, permite explorar el locus de la enunciación (Mignolo, 2009), evidenciando las inequidades. Al implementar estas estrategias, la investigación cualitativa crítica tiene el potencial de contribuir a una disrupción generativa, creando ciencias blandas que impulsan la transformación social.

Palabras clave: Ciencias de la salud, Investigación cualitativa, Ciencias blandas, Epistemología.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

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