

Costumes, Commodities, and Culture : on Shaping Knowledge

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I. Introduction

Madam President, Members of this distinguished organization, Ladies and Gentlemen. I bring you greetings from the Department of Apparel, Textiles, and Interior Design, Kansas State University. It is an honor to address this august body, attending the 2001 International Costume Culture Conference.

When I received the invitation to speak at your conference, I was flattered, to say the least, and wondered just what you wanted me to speak about. When **qualitative research** was mentioned, I became very concerned, and somewhat nervous to speak about a form of knowing that I perceive to be both contextual and cultural. But it is a form which I very much enjoy. I accepted the invitation with some degree of trepidation, since I am one who sees qualitative research as a useful form of cultural critique. Thus, to speak about qualitative research to an audience of experts in costume and culture whose reality differs from the hybrid cultural reality that I know, is in deed a daunting task.

You should know that it is my intention to put forth the proposition that the paternalistic research paradigm inherited from the European epistemology commonly known as the scientific method is not the only paradigm, and may not

be the most appropriate to facilitate the 'Leap and Practices of New Costume Culture of the 21st Century'. I intend to focus my talk on the use of other paradigms of practical significance in shaping knowledge in the 21st Century. I have therefore titled my talk, *Costumes, Commodities, and Culture: On Shaping Knowledge*.

For the purpose of this talk, I define costume as a style of dress, an ensemble considered as a unit, and typical of a certain country, period, and people. Dress, however, has a dynamic component which includes what people do to manage and maintain appearance¹⁾. Costume as dress in this definition is important since dress provides a window through which we might look into a culture, as Arthur²⁾ states, since it visually attests to the salient ideas, concepts, and categories fundamental to that culture (p.1). This notion suggests that dress has meaning which has the potential to be interpreted and understood. Thus, one may learn much about a culture by the study of its costume, i.e., its dress.

Kim³⁾ stated that as the world becomes one global economy, there will not be just a single market but also a fully integrated network of production. I might also add, and distribution. A feature of this network is the lost of significance of national borders as barriers to the movement of good and services. One result is the commo-

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¹ M. L. Damhorst, K. A. Miller, and S. O. Michelman, *The Meaning of Dress*, (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1999).

² L. B. Arthur, *Religion and dress*, (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 1999) : 1.

³ K. Kim, "Expanding horizons: Challenges and opportunities in the globalizing world", *Paper presented at The Joint World Conference of Korean Society of Clothing and Textiles and the International Textile and Apparel Association*, Seoul, Korea.(2001).

dification of costumes. Since costume/dress is meaning-laden, when costumes become commodities (i.e., are traded in world markets), traditional meanings may become distorted, lost, and/or replaced with new meanings as they cross geographic boundaries. This acceleration of global access to goods which, once expressed cultural autonomy do not generally contribute to an enhanced knowledge of other cultures; instead, cultural meanings become transmuted, diluted, transformed, displaced, replaced, or simply lost. Thus, as costumes are commodified they become entangled in a host of meanings framed by sociopolitical concerns, and thus they are symbolically charged by their sociality as well as their links to hierarchy and power⁴.

Despite the lack of consensus of meaning as commodities are shared across cultures, There is now a world culture, ... [which] is marked by an organization of diversity rather than a replication of uniformity⁵, Sahlins⁶ notes that.

In some measure, global homogeneity and local differentiation have developed together, the latter as a response to the former in the name of native cultural autonomy. The new planetary organization has been described as a Culture of cultures, a world cultural system made up of diverse forms of life. ... Thus, one complement of the new global ecumene is the so-called culturalism of very recent decades: the self-consciousness of their 'culture', as a value to be lived and defended, ... 'What the self-consciousness of 'culture' does signify is the demand of the peoples for their own space within the world cultural order.(p. X)

II. Discussion

How does this relate to qualitative research?

I contend that the self-consciousness of 'culture' demands an epistemology which allows for the multiple realities of the 'world culture' or 'Culture of cultures'. Qualitative Research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. Denzin and Lincoln state that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them ...the field of qualitative research is defined primarily by a series of essential tensions, contradictions, and hesitations. ... these tensions exist in a less-than-unified arena (p. 3). There are tensions of competing definitions, conceptions of the field, and different issues and concerns in different fields. There are also tensions concerning questions of interest, different networks, different literature bases, different theory and paradigm basis, as well as different styles of thinking about topics based on disciplinary, epistemological, gender, race, ethnic, cultural, and national beliefs, boundaries and ideologies⁷. These tensions, however, contribute to the versatility and adaptability of the many qualitative paradigms which might be employed in answering the many questions useful in understanding phenomena and in theory building. Note that I did not say useful for testing or validating theory. Denzin & Lincoln state that.

The word *qualitative* (*italic added*) implies an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not rigorously examined, or measured (if measured at all), in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers

⁴ L. A. Sharp, "The commodification of the body and its parts", *Annual Reviews of Anthropology* 29 (2000): 290.

⁵ U. Hannerz, "Cosmopolitans and locals in world culture", In *Global culture*, M. Featherstone (Ed), London: Sage (1990): 237.

⁶ M. Sahlins, "What is anthropological enlightenment? Some lessons of the Twentieth Century", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 28, p. x.

⁷ N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln, *op cit* : 3.

stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry ... In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. Inquiry is purported to be within a value-free framework. (p.4)⁸⁾

Why do I suggest exploring the use of research paradigms other than that which is called, in European-American terminology, the scientific method, or the received view and which is also known as the positivist tradition? To answer this

question, I think that it is useful to remind ourselves of the differences between the positivist and non-positivist traditions, and assumptions underlying the related paradigms. Guba and Lincoln⁹⁾ define paradigm as a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that represent a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the world, the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts, ... (p. 107). Paradigms define for the inquirers what it is they are about, and what falls within and outside the limits of legitimate inquiry.

Guba and Lincoln¹⁰⁾ state three questions for which answers determine what one believes

<Table 1> Basic Beliefs (Metaphysics) of Alternative Inquiry Paradigms

(Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 106)

Item	Positivism	Postpositivism	Critical Theory et al.	Constructivism
Ontology	Naive realism real reality but apprehendable	Critical realism real reality but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehendable	Historical realism virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values; crystallized over time	Relativism local and specific constructed realities
Epistemology	Dualist/objectivist; findings true	Modified dualist/objectivist; critical tradition/community; findings probably true	Transactional/subjectivist; value-mediated findings	Transactional/subjectivist; created findings
Methodology	Experimental/manipulative; verification of hypotheses; chiefly quantitative methods	Modified experimental/manipulative; critical multiplism; falsification of hypotheses; may include qualitative methods	Dialogic/dialectical	Hermeneutical/dialectical
Axiology	Explanation: prediction and control	Explanation: prediction and control	Critique and transformation; restitution and emancipation	Understanding; reconstruction

⁸ N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln. *op. cit.* : 4.

⁹ O. G. Guba & Y. S. Lincoln, "Competing paradigms in qualitative research", In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1994): 105-117. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage: 107.

about inquiry paradigms: 1) The *ontological* question - What is the form and nature of reality, and, therefore what is there that can be known about it? 2) The *epistemological* question - What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known? 3) The *methodological* question - How can the inquirer go about finding out what ever he or she believes can be known? Others add a fourth: the *axiological* question - What is the overall goal of the inquiry? The table below allows one to compare the basic beliefs related to several paradigms. Understanding beliefs and assumptions of various paradigms is crucial. One can not hope to produce or shape knowledge if the paradigm is inappropriate for the question under study.

I recently re-read a paper written by Dr. Sook Ja Lim entitled, *Crossing Boundaries: Facilitating International Collaborations*, which she presented at the 1998 Annual Meeting of the International Textile and Apparel Association. In that paper, she stressed the desire for the International Textile and Apparel Association to aid the facilitation of collaborative research between U. S. scholars and those of other countries. Dr. Lim analyzed 52 publications which she categorized as international collective research and found that 42 of them were on social psychology of clothing and fashion marketing. The primary focus of these studies was the consumer. She enumerated various challenges involved in conducting cross-cultural research, one which is the cultural differences may be too large. Cultural factors such as educational systems, customs, traditions, value systems and life styles exert potential influence on the behaviors and actions of consumers, ... (p. 4). She goes on to specify some of the cultural differences which contributed to the

differences found in the results of the studies. She noted that the reactions of the Korean consumers are quite different from those of American consumers. She finally states that there is danger in accepting the results of the analysis of the Korean and American consumers attribute, although she indicated her belief that if the challenges described could be alleviated the results of such collaboration would be Auseful for better understanding of other cultures¹¹⁾ (p. 8).

I mention Dr. Lim¹²⁾'s study here because I concur with her conclusion that there is danger in accepting the results of these studies relative to differences in attributes. I place my reason for agreeing with her, however, in the context of paradigmatic choice. In other words, the paradigm employed for use in most studies was positivist. Until most recently, the paradigm of choice of the *Clothing and Textile Research Journal* has been positivism. As the previous table illustrates, the ontological assumption of positivism is that there is an apprehendable reality which is time- and context- free. Using an experimental and manipulative methodology, in the form of questions and hypotheses, and controlling for confounding conditions, one should be able to converge on the 'true' state of affairs. This paradigm assumes universal 'truths' that can be known and generalized. However, as Sharp¹³⁾ indicates, this universalist thinking pampers analysis, especially of cultural studies.

III. Conclusion

Consumer behavior is driven by culture; and culture is contextual. Therefore, human behaviors such as those exhibited in consumption behavior should not be measured and compared

¹⁰ O. G. Guba. & Y. S. Lincoln, *op. cit.*

¹¹ L. J. Lim, "Crossing boundaries: Facilitating international collaboration", *Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Textile and Apparel Association*, Dallas, TX(1998): 4-8.

¹² L. J. Lim. (1998), *op. cit.* : 8.

¹³ L. A. Sharp, *op. cit.*

cross-culturally by using cultural specific measures or paradigms which assume a universal reality, time and context free. Since it is known that consumption behavior is influenced by culture, and cultures in the United States differ from those in Korea, the assumption of universal 'truths' which can be known is inappropriate. To employ a paradigm with invalid assumptions automatically leads to the lack of validity, a must for truth claims in the positivist paradigm. Thus, 'truths' in the research reported must be suspect.

I also concur with Dr. Lim¹⁴, that collaboration would be useful for better understanding of other cultures. However, the encountering of cultures should enable us to understand ourselves in relation to others rather than being used as an opportunity to compare and contrast differences which suggests 'otherness'. When differences are understood in the context of culture the result should be a 'heightened self-awareness'¹⁵ and appreciation for difference. Qualitative paradigms allow for the exploration of variability of questions in different socio-cultural contexts.

Costumes and commodities are objects of material culture. Commodities, like persons, have social lives¹⁶, and their worth are not limited to their exchange value. These goods may be entangled in a host of meanings and thus become objects of great symbolic significance. Analyses of material culture are most accurate when categories, definitions, and patterns of use, are determined locally where local scholars enter into debate and dialogues. Qualitative paradigms which are interpretative in

nature allow for local scholars to arrive at interpretation. Since there is the potential for multiple interpretations, the politics of meaning may enter the interpretation and must be acknowledged. However, local scholars are able to consider the ways individuals use objects in the construction of, for example, identity, social formations, and culture itself.

By viewing objects in terms of the structure, actions, and processes through which people produce, use, and evaluate them, researchers are better able to consider the dialectical relationship between objects and those who make or use them how people shape objects and, in turn, how particular uses of objects shape people¹⁷.

Thus, for understanding consumption behavior and other dynamic socio-cultural processes, interpretative paradigms are needed. These paradigms require, however, that interpretations are made within the context of the culture in which the inquiry is conducted.

When talking about qualitative research and interpretative paradigms, one is most often asked questions about validity and reliability. Again, these are issues of the positivist researcher. Researchers employing interpretative paradigms focus on the primacy of lived experience, the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims and an understanding of the culture and its history. Ethical principles and good judgement are considered the norm. 'Good judgement' is viewed as meeting standards related to credibility, thoroughness, coherence, comprehensiveness, appropriateness and contextuality. Also of great importance is whether the interpretation is useful^{18,19}.

¹⁴ L. J. Lim, *op. cit.* : 3.

¹⁵ M. G. S. Peirano, "When anthropology is at home: The different contexts of a single discipline", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 28 (1998): 110.

¹⁶ A. Appadurai. (Ed.), "The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective", (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), 3.

¹⁷ M. J. Arnoldi, C. M. Geary and K. L. Hardin. (Eds.), "African material culture", (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 11.

¹⁸ L. A. K. Hudson and J. L. Ozanne, "Alternative ways of seeking knowledge in consumer research", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14 (1988): 508-521.

Qualitative research is inherently multi-method in focus. The use of multi-methods or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Triangulation is not a tool or strategy of validation, but an alternative to validation²⁰.

While qualitative research offers many paradigms for knowing, my hope is that you will find something said here to be beneficial to you as you establish your own qualitative research tradition.

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¹⁹ G. B. Madison, "The hermeneutics of postmodernity", (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

²⁰ O. G. Guba and Y. S. Lincoln Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. (pp. 105-117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. (1994).