

Against a Critical Quantitative Orthodoxy

PROLIFERATION OF METHODOLOGIES AS A LIBERATORY POTENTIAL

Overview

Why are we drawn to orthodoxy, and why is it dangerous?

What makes a methodology critical?

Overview of the landscape in critical quantitative methodologies

Methodological proliferation and fragmentation

Recommendations

Discussion/Questions

Landscape of Critical Quantitative Methodologies

BRIEF overview

Critical Theory and quantitative criticalism

Critical Race Theory and QuantCrit

Queer studies and queer quantitative methods

Queer theory and QuantQueer

Indigenous statistics

Numerous emerging methods that integrate varying theoretical viewpoints and epistemologies

The Allure and Danger of Orthodoxy

What's So Wrong about Getting it Right?

Researchers, educators, and students want to *get it right*.

- What's the right analysis?
- What's the right measure?
- Did I do this right?

Checking the right box and following the right formula is comforting!

Most methods texts try to give clear guidelines and processes to follow.

For critical scholars, it can feel important to have guardrails.

Dangers of Orthodoxy

Checklists of 'right' practices can absolve of us reflexivity, intentionality, and community.

Limits our imagination in ways that constrain our ability to be responsive to resilient and evolving systems of oppression and marginalization

"Right" practices can become constructions of practices of "good" researchers

Constructs a deviant other – practices that diverge aren't just different

The construction of the 'good' and 'right' practice can lead to misuses

Comes from the culture of positivism (e.g., Giroux, 1979, 2011)

An Example: Effect Coding

One practice that has seen broad uptake in critical quantitative circles is effect coding in regression models.

An alternative to so-called “dummy coding”

Uses 1, 0, and -1 as group labels, whereas “dummy coding” is 1 and 0

Mathematically, this means comparison to the grand mean instead of a group mean for each coded vector

This reproduces the mathematical logic (and outcome) of the one-way ANOVA

An Example: Effect Coding

This approach was initially recommended as being less problematic than “dummy coding” due to the lack of a reference group (which in racial comparisons was usually white)

Is this critical? Maybe!

In the literature, it came to be almost universally adopted, often with some form of “to avoid the problems of racial comparisons”

But, this does not avoid the problems of racial comparisons! It mitigates one specific aspect of such comparisons

Used within reflexivity and intentionality (not to mention methodological care) it can be dangerous and misleading.

What is Critical about
Critical Methods,
Anyway?

Methods as Contingent Foundations

Criticality is difficult to define because it is, by nature, contingent, changing, fluid, and evolving

Methodologies are, I argue, not critical in and of themselves. Rather, their criticality derives from how they are used and the animating framework.

Critical approaches, broadly, seek to understand, interrogate, and interrupt systems of domination, marginalization, oppression, and exploitation. They seek to liberate, revolutionize, move toward equity, and empower.

Some methods lean more critical than others!

Methods as Contingent Foundations

The methodologies and methods are tools – and like any tool, they can be used for many purposes.

“Like the justice issues they take on, research methods, paradigms, and choices are situated in power relations. No inquiry space or tool transcends its context and time” (Bailey, 2017, p. 93)

We should not treat any method as “good” or “just” or “critical” without examining how it was used and for what purpose and through which framework(s)

Example: Interaction Terms

QuantCrit scholars have made use of interaction terms to try to get at interactions of systems – typically by interacting identity categories

For example, a study of gendered racism might use the interaction of gender and race as a proxy for the interaction of those two systems.

Is this critical? Maybe! The same result has multiple outcomes.

For example, how might different people interpret findings about interaction of race and gender on earning and promotion potential in the workplace?

Example: Disaggregation of Racial Categories

Other critical scholars (e.g., Irizarry & Cohen, 2024; Teranishi 2007) have argued for greater racial disaggregation beyond federal umbrella categories. Examples include the unique experiences of Afrolatine people, disaggregation by immigrant status, or breaking apart Asian into multiple regional subcategories.

Is this critical? Maybe! It again depends on the intentions, uses, and interpretive frameworks.

Racial disaggregation has a long history as a tool of white supremacy, but these and other examples have also used it to highlight and challenge racism.

So What is Critical Enough?

I think there is a danger in trying to define a rubric for criticality

Criticality, though, is community-oriented, liberation-oriented, and offers critiques of how the social order came to be and continues to exist

There is a range of approaches that vary from harm reduction to radical reimagination, and they probably all have value and a role to play

We can be clear about our criticality without foreclosing the possibility of other critical approaches and their potentials

Methodological Proliferation & Fragmentation

Paradigm Proliferation

I borrow heavily from Lather's (2007) argumentation around paradigm proliferation as a good thing.

Lather argues that categories of 'good' research are "dangerous structures" that exist in relationship with "preexisting structures of violence" – for "saying yes to the messiness, to that which interrupts and exceeds versus tidy categories" in order to "create alternative practices as sites of production and becoming... to move research in many different directions in the hope that more interesting and useful ways of knowing will emerge."

Proliferation and Fragmentation

I argue that we should not be seeking a unified approach to criticality in quantitative research

Rather, we should be asking how we can continue to reimagine approaches, invent alternatives, ask different questions, and continually reinvent what is possible

Different critical perspectives need not be in competition – asking how multiple theories explain the same observations and realities can generate powerful insights and open possibilities for action

The methodological landscape will become more complex – *and that's a good thing*

Embracing Fluidity, Reflexivity, and Community

Reflexivity

Critical scholars do not view themselves as separate from the social, political, and historical systems that they research

We participate (whether as beneficiary or target) from the systems we seek to critique and change

Who we are matters to the work we do. How do we relate to the communities affected by our work? How are we answerable to those communities? Are we centering ourselves in the inquiry? Are we being extractive or generative?

Fluidity

As Butler and other queer and trans scholars often and powerfully argue – there is no right or true end point to our work. And there is no language, terminology, definition, methodology, analytic tool, or data visualization strategy that will be and stay right.

Systems of oppression and marginalization are incredibly resilient and adaptive. Our work has to be fluid to find the new and evolving opportunities to imagine an otherwise or open possibilities for lived realities

Generosity and Humility

My approach, my methods, and my theoretical orientations aren't right, and neither are yours

Critical perspectives largely reject the idea of an absolute or universal truth, and yet critical scholars can be quick to reject perspectives that differ from their own

We should engage with methodological and theoretical humility, openness, and flexibility

We should also engage one another's work generously

Keeping the Approaches Contingent

“Social justice methods must remain ‘contingent foundations.’ These practices might involve an array of new questions about existing paradigms governing inquiry, new methodologies, new onto-epistemologies, new tools that open dominant practices to fluidity and creativity oriented toward changes... The practices are diverse, contested, and always unfolding – and it serves emancipatory ends to keep them that way” (Bailey, 2017, p. 104)

An Additional Recommendation

The theories matter a great deal in critical quantitative approaches – we should learn about the theories we engage and the people and communities that generated them

The methods matter, too, and we should learn them deeply so our critiques, innovations, and divergences are informed and thoughtful

Questions & Discussion

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