Qualitative Methods and the ‘Analytic Gaze:’
An Affirmation of Scientism?

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents an argument organized in two parts: The first part is an interpretive sketch of the history of Qualitative Research in educational studies, as a developing appreciation for the primacy of interpretation in the organization of social worlds. The second part offers an alternative understanding of the analytic tasks encountered within an interpretively constructed social world – an alternative reading of the "Interpretive Move." Rather than a template for professional analytic methods, the insight of interpretation is taken as pointing to a foundational topic for social science. The interpretive practices of everyday life, in the difference, the interpretive methods of ordinary worlds come into view, setting aside the professional discourse on methodological interpretation. An analysis of a transcript from a 5th grade classroom complements the argument.

KEYWORDS: interaction, classroom interaction, classroom order, interpretation, conversational analysis, post-positivism, ethnomethodology, qualitative research, classroom studies, social construction.

Introduction: Positivism and its Eclipse
This paper is another reflection on the growing interest in qualitative research methods for educational studies. With the discovery of social phenomena by a research community whose roots are abidingly psychological, a discourse of alternatives to our prevailing conceptualizations of social science and the social world has flourished.

Much of the discourse on qualitative methods promises an eclipse of the science positivism that is largely implicit, when not explicit, in the mainstream theory and methods of educational research (for examples of the promise, see the teaching texts of Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). These discussions of alternatives to natural science epistemology tend to be framed in terms of oppositional pairings, the most familiar of which are the respective sciences themselves (the natural and the
social), their respective worlds, and the continuities and discontinuities between them. The sense of difference, and of ill fit, between natural science epistemology and the organization of meaningful social worlds is perhaps the central agreed upon thematic of the post-positivist discourse, and sustaining it is a broad consensus on the primacy of interpretation for the order and meaning of social worlds (cf., Blumer, 1969; Ericsson, 1986; Geertz, 1973; Walker, 1992). As Schütz (1962) convincingly writes of it, while meaning means nothing to molecules, the social scientist encounters a world that is already meaningfully interpreted by those who live there. Attention in educational research, and elsewhere, has thus turned to framing analytic programs that would be suited to such an already interpreted world. A central question of this paper is: In these critical discussions and sketches of alternatives, are the abiding presumptions of natural scientism eclipsed, or are they fundamentally preserved?

The Interpretive Move in Educational Studies

The post-positivist discourse is, of course, polyphonic. However, in the exercise of argument, I want to collect and broadly characterize its voices as constituting an Interpretive Move in social science. The Interpretive Move posits the primacy of interpretation for the organization of social worlds, and also for their study. I further want to attribute the Move to an affirmation of the social psychologies of G.H. Mead, Herbert Blumer, W.I. Thomas, and others in American social science, to anthropology's analytic program of cultural relativism (Geertz, 1973, Lee, 1950; Ortner, 1984; Wax, 1971), and to more recent constructivist (and textual deconstructivist) discourses in psychology, philosophy, and women's studies (see Erickson, 1986 and 1992 for reviews of interpretive themes in educational research). Interpretation has moved to the center of the educational research discourse, and of the several ways of speaking of interpretation in educational studies, Howe and Eisenharkt (1990) express the Move in its most familiar terms. Research knowledge of the social world is itself irreparably interpretive "because all scientific investigation is inherently laden with theory, inherently an outgrowth of human purposes and theoretical constructions, it is, broadly speaking, inherently interpretive" (1990, p. 3). In this, they are speaking on behalf of scientific interpretation, rather than the uncredentated interpretation of the streets, and this too is the familiar casting of the methodological discourse of the Interpretive Move.

The Interpretive Move opens the richness of interpreted fields for inquiry (cf., Denzin, 1989; Eisner, 1981; Spindler, 1982; Van Maanen, 1988; Wolcott, 1994; Woods & Hammerly, 1977). It opens conundrums as well. The embrace of interpretation as the fundamental field of social order and meaning poses the task