

# Blue-Collar Qualitative Research: A Rant

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## Abstract

This here's a kick-ass article 'bout a pissed off qualitative researcher who feels that some of you higher ed profs out there got a lotta attitude and need to be brought down a notch. I speak my mind in this piece 'bout a lotta stuff, like me, positionality, voice, labels, method, theory, ethics, and other crap like that. I write like a redneck 'cause that's what's in my blue-collar soul. I keep it real. Take it or leave it.

## Keywords

blue collar, qualitative research, rant

Hey, y'all. This here's an article 'bout gittin' real with what we do. Of course, I want ever'body doin' qualitative research to read it, but I know that ain't gonna happen. So, if you like this piece, tell your friends. If you don't like this piece, tell 'em that, too. I'd appreciate the word-of-mouth, regardless. Like that playwright Oscar Wilde said, "The only thing worse than bein' talked about, is *not* bein' talked about."

Grad students: This is an article some of your tight-ass professors may not want you to read—which is exactly why you *should* read it, OK?

So, loosen your tie, uncinch your belt a notch, kick your shoes off, and read on . . .

## My Position

The only reason I'm writin' 'bout this is 'cause some people seem to put a lotta stock in "positionality." Me: I can take it or leave it. But in case ya need to know, here goes:

My position? I'm right here in front of you. Look at me: I'm a 59-year-old man with a white beard. Gay leather bear, Hispanic, a touch of Cajun (in spirit, not by blood), with a little bit of bad-ass biker in me, and a proud dash of red-neck-wannabe. Overweight, asthmatic, a little arthritis; I don't complain much, I git by. There's other weird shit, but you really don't wanna know 'bout that. None of your business anyways. I worry 'bout a secure retirement; who doesn't at my age in these times? No PhD here. I got a MFA in theatre, though. Some people look down on that. I used to care but don't anymore. I got street cred now. I know people, and they know me.

I grew up poor, too. That's prob'ly the most important thing ya need to know 'cause that's what really matters in this piece. My mama and daddy, God rest their souls, worked hard to raise five kids and send me to college—the first one in my family. I'm middle class now; doin' good,

got a nice suburban roof over my head, worked hard for it. But there's a sayin' from one of my cultures: "A Mexican may git rich, but he'll still drink in the cantina." (If you need someone to explain to you what that means, then maybe a lotta this article's gonna be over your head.) I can have a real good time talkin' to a trucker, construction worker, day laborer, server, janitor, any minimum-wage earner, and show him or her the respect that is their due. But I can't always say the same for some of the so-called "doctors" I talk to at professional conferences, though.

In the early American plays, the common workin' man characters was the heroes and called the "blue shirt" roles—prob'ly 'cause they was traditionally dressed up in blue shirts, and maybe where the term "blue collar" comes from. This everyday man was prized over the rich, elite, snobbish characters in the plays who was always made fun of for their highfalutin' ways and who always got their comeuppance in the end.

I wrote this piece 'cause a coupla years ago I got really pissed off at some of the highbrow attitude I heard at a research conference. It offended me that some people—some very smart but, in my opinion, very misguided people—talk like that, *think* like that. My lower-class roots got gnarled up tight at the indignity of their pretension, their assumptions of authority, their "I know the truth and you don't" arrogance. People like that prob'ly won't read what I have to write anyways. No matter. The important part is that this is in print somewhere for others who care.

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So, where and what is my position? It is smack dab in the middle of my blue-collar universe, and smack dab in the middle of your face.

## Where I'm Comin' From

OK. Now . . . you see . . . this is another one of those things that some people seem to put a lotta stock in: “conceptual framework,” “theoretical perspective,” “epistemological foundations,” “methodological premises”—whatever. How 'bout me just sayin' what it really is and what I really mean: *This is where I'm comin' from.*

First point: Jim Goad's *The Redneck Manifesto: How Hillbillies, Hicks, and White Trash Became America's Scapagoats* is a bitter but kick-ass rant. Sure, you gotta take some of what Goad writes with a grain of salt—he's an angry white man, after all. But I learned more 'bout what it feels like and what it means to be a white man in today's society from his manifesto, more than from any of my scholarly multicultural education textbooks and journals. Go figger. But the reason I'm pointin' this book out is 'cause this article is *my* redneck manifesto—my pissed-off, blue-collar perspective on where some crazy qualitative researchers is goin'. It kinda adopts Goad's writin' style, too. I'm givin' him credit for that.

Second point: Jeff Foxworthy of the Blue-Collar Comedy Tour humorously defines a redneck as anyone with “a total lack of sophistication.” Him and his buddies Bill Engvall, Ron White, and Larry the Cable Guy are seen by many as the blue-collar heroes of today—men who ain't afraid to speak their minds and point out all the weird and stupid stuff we do. Are their routines racist? Yeah. Sexist? Yeah. Homophobic? Yeah. Funny? Hell yeah. What these guys did was make bein' a redneck acceptable—fashionable, even. Trendy redneck-wannabes, like me, are *knowingly and tongue-in-cheekly performin'* their total lack of sophistication. But there's a pride 'bout it, too. To be a redneck, to be blue collar, is to be real—to have your feet on the ground and not your nose up in the air.

Third point: Norm Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (God love 'em, they're good people) wrote 'bout “moments” in the history of qualitative research. Sometimes, I shake my head at the off-the-wall talk flyin' 'round at conferences today and think, “Well, we must be in the ‘*bullshit moment*’ now!” Some of the things I've been hearin' at these meetin's make me madder than a grounded theorist without a core category.

## My Blue-Collar Voice

Most people say that each person's voice is important—but sometimes we don't always wanna hear what some folks gotta say, right? Be honest. There's others out there who want desperately to understand other people through their

research, but some scholarly types don't always make the effort to *listen*. Sometimes, I have to say what I feel needs to be said two times before people are actually listenin'. Sometimes, I have to say what I feel needs to be said two times before people are actually listenin'. You wanna know who I am, what I think, and how I feel? Then just *listen*. Really *listen*. Shut the fuck up, and *listen*.

Now, what's with all the cussin', you're prob'ly thinkin'. Well, the blue-collar voice can be a profane voice. Obscenities are said not just out of a total lack of sophistication, but to make a point, or because we're pissed off, or sometimes just 'cause it's dirty fun. Throughout this article, you'll read the occasional “goddamn” and “fuck you” and other choice cuss words. They're not always meant to shock, but to make a point, or because I'm angry, or to keep you awake.

Profanity is subjective, anyways. What's profane to me is not someone who says “fuck.” What's profane to me is what happened to the people trapped in the World Trade Center on 9/11. What's profane to me is big business CEOs makin' millions of dollars in salary perks while their minimum-wage workers is livin' off food stamps. What's profane to me is all the racist, sexist, legislative bullshit happenin' in states like Arizona, North Carolina, and Texas. Profanity, to me, is not what someone says. Profanity is what people *do* to each other that hurts or kills. I really doubt that me sayin' one “goddamn” is as profane or offensive as the thousands if not millions of folks in Africa dyin' from AIDS right now. So, keep my cussin' in perspective, OK? If you got problems with my profane voice, then *fuck you*—go read somethin' else. Let the people with balls on 'em keep readin'.

(Granted, “fuck you” is not the most sophisticated of retorts, but when it's said by me, at least you know it's heartfelt and sincere.)

## Labels

Labels can be very deceivin'. For example, the label “conservative” makes me think, “Why don't you just call yourself what you really are—a tight-assed, hateful, holier-than-thou bigot.” (But that's just me thinkin' out loud.) I can understand the need for labels to identify who you are; I use 'em all the time. Sometimes I'm a “pragmatist.” Sometimes I'm a “bear.” And sometimes I'm a “vindictive little bitch.” It all depends on where I am, who I'm with, and what the occasion calls for as the need arises.

Some people proudly call themselves a “post-structuralist” or “critical theorist” or some other fancy five-dollar term. And you can certainly make a life's work out of studyin' that stuff. But if that's all you do, it kinda limits who you are and what you can accomplish. Every time I hear or read that someone's followin' the “hermeneutic circle,” I keep thinkin' of some dumb ol' hound dog chasin' its own tail 'round and 'round and 'round. It *looks* like fun, but he ain't really gittin' anywhere, is he?

Me, I keep myself open to bein' and doin' what needs to be done. I'll be a grounded theorist when I need to be. I'll be a statistician and crunch some numbers when I need to. And I'll be a poet or playwright or artist when the occasion calls for it. It's all 'bout findin' the right tool for the right job. There's somethin' to be said 'bout that. Blue-collar folks are good craftspeople—they know their tools. They work hard and they sweat harder. Sweatin' analysis is gittin' your hands dirty in the data. It's muscle work, and you git stronger and smarter with each project. Nothin' wrong with the craftspersonship of it. An honest day's qualitative work for an honest day's quantitative pay.

I used to think that the “intellectual elite” attack was the narrow-minded conservatives' slam-dunk at things they didn't understand. But after hearin' some of them “intellectual elites” at research conferences, maybe they got a point. After all, I think that post-structuralists are the Republicans of qualitative inquiry—they's firmly convinced that they's always right and everybody else should think the same way. *Fuck that.* There's been this talk in our field 'bout the “crisis of representation.” Well, lemme tell you: Some of us *are* the “crisis of representation” 'cause a coupla people out there are representin' themselves as real elitist assholes.

Post-positivist, post-modernist, post-colonial, post-structuralist—aw, post-, my ass. Post *this*. . .

## Method

A teacher by the name of Dorothy Heathcoate once told me, “You don't go 'back to basics,' you go *forward* to basics once you've figgered out what those new basics are.” The problem with our field is that there's some kinda general understandin' 'bout what's what, but no real tried-and-true “how to.” Seems like ever'body's got their own way of doin' things—which is good, in a way. It's kinda like puttin' your ironin' brand or personal signature on what you did and wrote. Yeah, I got my own ways of workin'; I never met a code I didn't like. Qualitative research is kinda like meat loaf: ever'body got their own way of makin' it. But if we're all doin' stuff our own way, then how do we know if we hit the nail on the head? Some folks call it “credibility” or “trustworthiness.” I just call it “the real thing.” When I'm talkin' 'bout my findings, and I see other people's heads noddin' or—even better—hearin' 'em say out loud, “That's right!” then I know I got the bull by the horns and caught the real thing.

## Theory

OK . . . here's where I got *real* problems. Maybe it's just me, but those folks who promote and teach a lot 'bout theory and feel that it's the be-all-and-end-all of research are a lotta times those who rarely come up with any original theories of their own. A teachin' buddy of mine with a doctoral

degree herself once told me, “PhDs are paid to think of a lotta useless stuff.” Some theory is good and has its place; it helps us in day-to-day life. But git to the point already. If it's a theory, say it's a theory. Don't make me go huntin' for it through 30-some-odd pages of manuscript. Italicize it, bold it, put it in a box, hold it up to my hairy face and say, “Here's my theory!”—and fill in the blank.

And while we're at it, to be “critical” doesn't mean to bitch and whine 'bout it. It means to take somethin' apart, to show where all the warts are, and to right the wrongs. If you really wanna know what's wrong with the world, then git your ass out to the 'hood, walk 'round and talk to people. *Listen* to what they have to say.

And one more thing: Blue-collar qualitative researchers don't give a goddamn fuck 'bout what Foucault says.

## Questions and Answers

If alls there is these days is ambiguity, uncertainty, unresolved complexity, and unanswered questions, then Jesus Christ, what's it all for? Let's just pack up and go home.

There's some misguided people out there who think that alls they gotta do is come up with a smart question and their job's done. Well, fuck that noise. I want answers. I *need* answers. Some folks will say, “Well, it's not that simple,” to which I usually reply, “It's prob'ly not that complicated, either.” Straight talk—sometimes the most profound thoughts are said usin' the simplest of words. The steelworker from Studs Terkel's *Working* said, “It isn't that the average working guy is dumb. He's tired, that's all.” Wow. . .

Try to put the complexity of what you need to say into as simple a language as possible. Now *that's* the sign of a true data analyst and a true thinker. Find the essence, the essentials, the elegance. If you're lookin' for answers, then find out what drives people to do the crazy shit that they do. It's usually out of love, duty, hatred, anger, ambition, boredom, jealousy, desperation, revenge, hunger, thirst, sleepiness, horniness—your basic emotional and physical food groups.

I got a lotta problems with highbrows who just wanna mentally masturbate and think up a lotta questions and not even bother answerin' 'em. Ask me a question if you want me to think, but at least give it a shot yourself. Stop wastin' paper or conference time or digital space if you don't have any answers yourself to the questions you ask. *Do your goddamn job as a researcher and answer the goddamn questions you pose.* If you don't have an answer—even your best guess—then don't bother askin' *me* the question, OK? It's not the questions that are interestin'. It's the answers that are interestin'. It's the answers that are profound. “Is there a God?” won't be half as excitin' as a definitive “Yes,” “No,” or “It's somethin' different all together.” So if you ask tough questions, you better damn well come up with some tough answers.

## On Bein' Ethical

I usually avoid goin' to any conference session that has the word "ethics" or "ethical" in the title. Those gigs are usually a lotta frettin' and angstin' and hand wringin' and a lotta—yeah—unanswered questions. Some folks seem to make a life's work out of studyin' the subject. I got no problem with that, I know it's important. But I do slyly remember an old folk sayin' that goes, "We teach what we wanna learn."

Now, I ain't gonna pass myself off as some high and mighty saint when it comes to research ethics. I've made my fair share of mistakes in the field, and fucked up pretty bad on two occasions with my work. Both times, it was one of those I-didn't-see-it-comin' moments. I learned from that and moved on and vowed to keep my eyes wide open so it hopefully never happens again. But there comes a time when you just gotta git to the bottom line, and to those who just go on and on and on 'bout ethics, I really wanna ask, "What part of 'But first, do no harm' do you not understand?"

## Respect

I don't always dis' those with a doctoral degree. Ain't got one myself, but I know some of you worked real hard for one. And I won't deny that some people are very smart, but when you lord it over me, you just lost favor in my eyes. Then what happens is that people like me start resentin' and makin' fun of people like you. And when you become somebody else's satire, then you really gotta take a good hard look at yourself, you know?

I like that sayin', "You're entitled to your own opinion, but not your own facts." So, state your opinions, but not so forcefully or arrogantly that they seem like gospel truth. It's just one person's opinion. Tell me what you think—I'll listen. I may agree, I may disagree. I may think it's insightful, I may think it's total bullshit. But at least I'll listen. Just extend me the same courtesy, OK? You can even feel free to think that what I say is bullshit, too. But if the reason is 'cause you feel you're just smarter than me, then what you're really sayin' is you think I'm dumber than you. No need to tell me, "You're wrong." That assumes you automatically got the right answer. Just tell me, "I got a different way of lookin' at it," and tell me what's goin' through your head. But don't try to persuade me or make me change my mind. That's my job, not yours.

Now, there's some folks out there who's never gonna change no matter what. I guess they learned that bein' a professor means bein' super smart and thinkin' you got the inside edge on the rest of us. Well, I don't hang out with "those kind of people"—admittedly, maybe that's why I don't understand 'em, right? (C'mon—tell the truth and

shame the devil!) Well, human nature, I guess, that some of us is just plain folks and others is ambitious folks. The newer generation should honor the older generation for their contributions to the field. Show 'em the respect which is their due. But the newer generation also needs to cut through some of the older crap that's out there and say, "Thanks, but, we'll take it from here." Lead the charge. Raise some qualitative hell.

Blue-collar researchers got a secret handshake, of sorts—a smile and head nod to a stranger as you're approachin' each other. It's a small action but says so much. It says, "I see you as a fellow human bein' and worthy of respect. You ain't got a corner on the truth and neither do I. But together, I bet we can figger it out." Remember that the original meanin' of datum is "somethin' given." Data is a gift, so be thankful for it when it's given to you and treat it with respect.

## You Need to Bring It Down a Notch

Just like the Blue-Collar Comedy guys got their signature lines—"You might be a redneck," "Here's your sign," and "Git 'er done"—I got mine: "You need to bring it down a notch." That means that if your head's floatin' off into some outer space dimension, or if your hoity-toity attitude's pissin' some people off, then you need to git back in touch with reality. "You need to bring it down a notch" is a little more civil than "Take the stick outta your ass, you shit-for-brains," but it means the same thing. For example, If you don't like the food at Cracker Barrel, you need to bring it down a notch. If you would never dream of stayin' a night at a Motel 6, you need to bring it down a notch. Here's my list for my qualitative research buddies:

- If you feel you *gotta* cite Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, or Habermas in any of your work, you need to bring it down a notch.
- If you put prefixes in parentheses, like (re)search or (de)construction, or separate 'em with slashes like un/conditional or mis/appropriation, you need to bring it down a notch.
- If you use any combination of the words *body*, *bodies*, *bodied*, *bodying*, *embodied*, *embodying*, or *embodiment* more than five times in one paragraph, you need to bring it down a notch.
- If you say you're usin' grounded theory, but don't have a core category, you need to bring it down a notch.
- If you teach a lot 'bout theory, but haven't come up with any original theories of your own, you need to bring it down a notch.
- If you think that anythin' is "undertheorized," you need to bring it down a notch.

- If you call yourself a “post-anything,” you need to bring it down a notch.
- If you’re making any money offa your research with people who make less money than you, you need to bring it down a notch.
- If your conference session don’t make people take notes, or if your book don’t make people highlight passages in yellow pen, or if people ain’t motivated to download your article after readin’ the abstract, you need to bring it down a notch.
- If you worship the *APA Manual* like a bible, you need to bring it down a notch.
- If you call your work a “performance,” but alls you’re really doin’ is just sittin’ on your ass behind a table readin’ aloud from a paper—and poorly, at that—you need to bring it down a notch.
- If ever’body on your five-member conference session panel is white, you need to bring it down a notch.
- If you’d feel uncomfortable interviewin’ a homeless person, a gay transsexual with HIV, or a Mexican immigrant, you need to bring it down a notch.
- If you’re a professor and really don’t want your students to read this article, you need to bring it down a notch.
- If you’re thinkin’ this article is a “performance,” *fuck you* and you need to bring it down a notch.
- If you’re pissed as hell after readin’ this article—well, that’s actually a good thing, but still—you need to bring it down a notch.

### See Ya—Bye

To those of you who still feel the blue-collar qualitative research perspective is total bullshit, thanks for kickin’ my

hairy ass and makin’ me write this piece. It’s people like you who make people like me wanna be a better researcher. And, it felt good to git this offa my chest.

To those of you who laughed out loud or even shouted “Fuck yeah!” as you read any of this stuff, hook up with me at the next research conference and let’s go out for a beer. The drinks are on me, buddy.

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### References

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### Author Biography

**Johnny Saldaña** is a worn-out, burnt-out prof who’s gonna retire soon from Arizona State University and just spend the rest of his years writin’ books and messin’ on the Interweb. He wrote *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Sage Publications) and he’s pretty goddamn proud of that.