*Original Paper*

# Unpacking Sites and Cultures of Methodological Animosity: Teaching Qualitative Research in Spaces that are Hostile to Qualitative Researchers

Constance Iloh

*Abstract*

*In this article, the author posits that in order to ensure the vitality and sustainability of qualitative work, we must also consider the ecosystems where qualitative research is taught. In particular, this text illumines the challenges for those teaching qualitative inquiry in academic environments hostile to qualitative scholars and scholarship. In doing so, the author presents several ways one can identify academic spaces that are antagonistic to qualitative research and researchers. Afterward, the text outlines strategies scholars might consider in traversing such sites and cultures. Throughout, the author weaves in their insights and observations as a qualitative methodologist and educator. The text concludes with a grounding of the violence inflicted on qualitative instructors and researchers as well the impact this has on the research enterprise.*

*Keywords*

*qualitative research, qualitative inquiry, epistemic violence, teaching, research methods, academia, hostile environment, qualitative methods, higher education, inequities, oppression, power asymmetries, academic bullying, academic mobbing, memes, organizational culture*

## Introduction

The spaces where qualitative research is taught are just as important as the fields and sites where qualitative research is conducted. Moreover, qualitative courses are often neglected environments for understanding epistemic violence. While one might assume that higher education and academia are neutral grounds for any form of methodological training, I discuss the hostility often extended to qualitative research in certain contexts. This text highlights the ways methodological animosity takes form particularly for qualitative scholars tasked with teaching qualitative research in graduate education. I also illustrate indicators of enmity towards qualitative scholars, scholarship, and teaching. Additionally, I offer important considerations for those tasked with teaching qualitative methods in these spaces and end with the toll and consequences such environments present.

**Different Times, Same War?**

Scholars today might purport that the paradigm wars, which saw qualitative and quantitative scholars as adversaries, have since been quelled. But what if such a war never dissipated, and is very much alive in spaces like the classroom? I assert that in order to understand the challenges facing the present and future of qualitative inquiry particularly, we must be attentive to more situated contexts, such as introductory qualitative courses.

To be sure, the hostility extended to qualitative inquiry and scholars in certain academic environments should not be divorced from paradigm and methodology conflicts that have plagued academe as a whole, and an array of disciplines in particular (Bredo, 2009; Denzin, 2010; Lather, 2006; Mahoney & Goertz, 2006; Smith, 1983). It is especially the case that qualitative research is despised "in disciplines dominated by positivist and quantitative science (Galasiński, 2017)." When qualitative methods are housed in fields that are in a state of "methodological contestation," such spaces require "either complicity with or resistance to the resurgence of the hegemony of positivism (Wright, 2006, p. 793)." Additionally, debates that pit qualitative research against quantitative research suffocate the learning and development (Vogt, 2008). My goal in this text is to unpack hostility and animosity that can be directed to qualitative inquiry and its teaching.

**Teaching Qualitative Research: An Intellectual Playground or Battleground?**

Teaching at its best is an opportunity to create an intellectual playground. However, classrooms and courses are not apolitical and neutral territories. At their worst, these spaces (whether in-person or remote) can become hostile arenas. This is particularly true for qualitative inquiry and those that may inhabit the epistemic violence directed to qualitative research and researchers. This paper specifically situates the disdain that can result in and contribute to an antagonistic space for qualitative researchers who teach qualitative methods courses. I attend to the indicators of hostile environments and how instructors who find themselves in such spaces might navigate them. As the remainder of the text unfolds, experiential insights from teaching in such environments are also highlighted.

This text especially focuses on the harsh realities of those who teach introductory graduate qualitative courses for a few reasons. I focus on qualitative scholars teaching introductory qualitative methods courses because those classes are more likely to be required courses for graduate students, hence them also being a methodological battleground. Additionally, while qualitative research is taught at other levels of education and in a myriad of contexts and communities outside of graduate education, I wish to situate the harms localized within academic institutions in graduate research programs.

**Indicators of Academic Spaces Hostile to Qualitative Research**

This text centers how qualitative scholars and the teaching of qualitative inquiry is endangered in sites of enmity. In doing so, it is important I shed light on what such spaces might look like. While this text focuses more on teaching environments, it is important to note that this disdain can manifest in

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numerous ways outside of what qualitative instructors of introductory course experience. To that end, this is just one situated context within this realm of concern.

### *Overwhelming Culture of Disrespect and Disparagement of Qualitative Research*

One telling sign of a hostile space towards qualitative research and instructors is consistent disrespect and disparagement of qualitative research and scholars. While such a culture can be pervasive throughout multiple areas of an entire academic unit, it can take on a striking dynamic in the realm of introductory qualitative courses. Within these spaces, comments are constantly made publicly and privately that assert qualitative research is not serious, useful, or rigorous (see Figure 1). These comments are typically blanket opinions and not critiques grounded in evidence and examples. Specific qualitative scholars may also be singled out for disparagement, ridicule, hazing, withholding of resources, and intense scrutiny as well. It also may be suggested in and around the classroom ecosystem that qualitative research is not empirical, sending the message that it is not capable of yielding scientific discovery. Such ideologies work to undermine the contributions of existing qualitative researchers while hindering emerging researchers' ability to explore the vitality of this tradition. It is likely the case that those that participate in this disrespect and disparagement (particularly students and faculty) are not only not held accountable, they are more than likely empowered and supported.
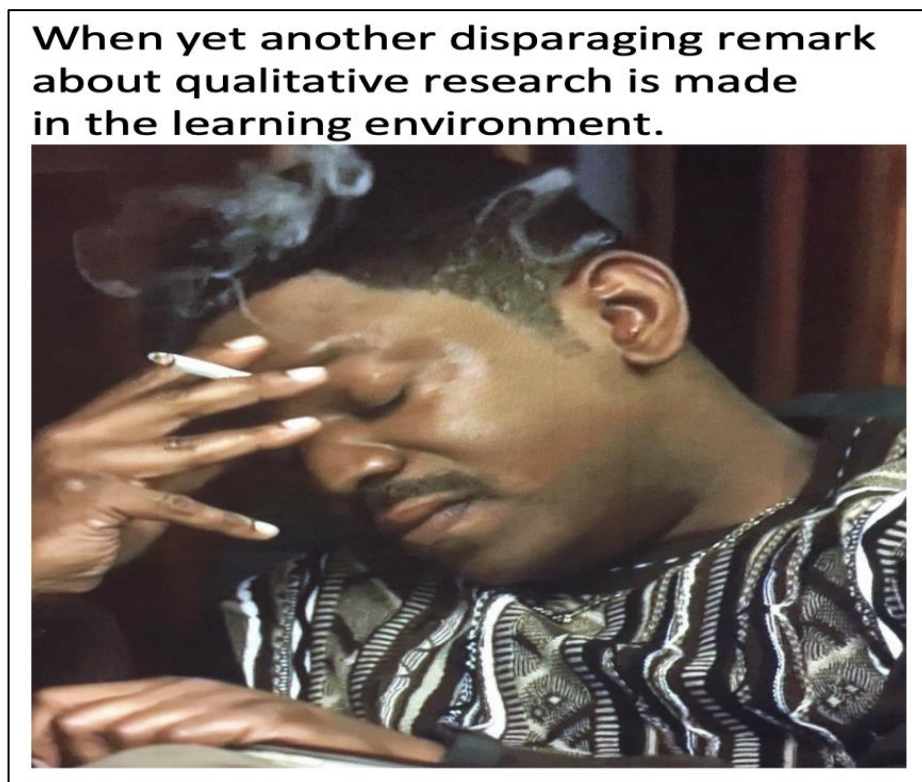


**Figure 1. Disparaging remarks about qualitative work (Iloh, 2022)**

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Within the confines of the classroom, there is a culture of disrespect particularly to the course content and instructor. For example, students may share that they were told by other advisors, faculty, and other students, "Qualitative research is not real science." These statements can lead students to constantly challenge and question the course and instructor in ways they would not in any other course. I have observed in such environments some students outright questioning why attendance as well as assignments were necessary. On one occasion, a student asked me to change the assignments so that they were quantitative, since he believed himself and other students were not going to need qualitative research training. While other more heinous comments have been omitted, it is important to note that my expressed concerns about such a culture were routinely gaslit, ignored, and dismissed.

### Lack of Resources, Courses, and Support for Qualitative Research

One might be able to discern that an environment holds animosity towards qualitative inquiry and scholars just from a lack of scholarly and curricular support for qualitative research. As it is often stated, a space's values are reflected in their investments. It speaks volumes when there are minimal to no course offerings for qualitative research, while there exists a plethora for other traditions. For example, if there is only one introductory qualitative course while there are several quantitative courses, such a disparity may be indicative of an unsupportive space that devalues qualitative inquiry.

Another issue this creates is inequitable workloads for qualitative instructors. Due to these arenas likely having few qualitative courses and faculty willing to teach these courses, those that do will become a stretched resource. This includes student mentoring that is likely not formally accounted for and recognized for its substantial labor and sacrifice. Cumulatively, this context constrains what qualitative instructors are able to do compared to their quantitatively-oriented peers. Consequently, it is detrimental for any culture to place the weight of an entire qualitative tradition on one or a few individuals in an already hostile and unsupportive climate.

### Qualitative Instructors are Bullied and Mobbed by Faculty and Students

When a space is hostile to qualitative research and scholars, it leaves scholars vulnerable to academic mobbing and bullying by students and faculty. Academic bullying and mobbing both take shape as "repeated attempts to discredit, destabilize or instill fear in an intended target, from overt abuse to subtle acts that erode the confidence, reputation and progress of the victim (Averbuch et al., 2021, p.1)." It is likely the case that academic mobbing and bullying are especially prevalent for qualitative researchers in hostile environments because they lack support systems and enmity can easily be actualized as bullying and mobbing behaviors. Because qualitative scholars and educators in these spaces are likely outnumbered, they also face power asymmetries and gaslighting of their abuse (Iloh, 2021a). Accordingly, parties who want to harm, whether it be by an individual or collective, have means and space to do so (Keashly, 2019). Students, enabled by and also taking cues from the climate, may also believe that they can harm, harass, lie about, and sabotage qualitative scholars in general, and

educators in the classroom space in particular.

The task of teaching introductory courses at the graduate level may likely be placed on individuals more vulnerable to academic mobbing and bullying. It is already the case that scholars more prone to being academically mobbed and bullied are: younger (relative to the rest of their scholarly peers); historically excluded and racially minoritized; and women (Iloh, 2021a; Lampman, 2012; Lampman et al., 2016; Prevost & Hunt, 2018). These individuals may already face a myriad of power differentials, violence, and inequities such that no one takes their work conditions seriously and excuses are made for why such problematic behavior is permissible.

### *Frequent Departure and Lack of Retention of Qualitative Scholars*

Another indicator of an environment antagonistic to qualitative scholars is less retention of those faculty, and even in some cases students. Faculty may be eager to exit or switch out of an academic department, unit, or college where they have to navigate a hostile terrain (see Figure 2). Consequently, they then seek out better spaces for their work and well-being. Additionally, students may find the climate, curriculum, and culture is insufficient and/or detrimental to their educational development and training.
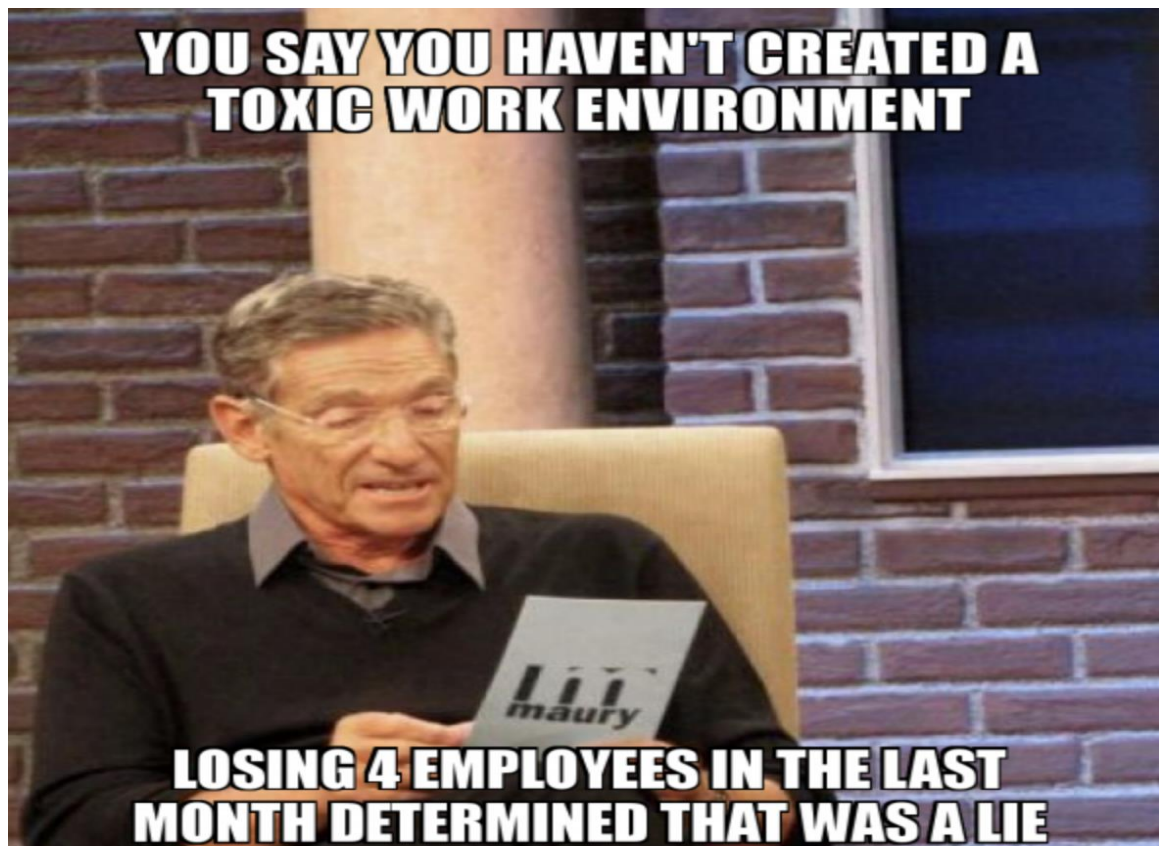


**Figure 2. Example indicator of a space hostile to qualitative scholarship and scholars (Toxic work environment lie detector, 2020)**

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It should be troubling when the majority of scholars that leave a department are those that primarily work from a qualitative tradition. Similar to the previous indicators, it is worth noting intersecting identities will also play a role in elevating conditions leading to departure of qualitative scholars. Such turnover can run concurrent with waves of racism, sexism, anti-Blackness, whiteness, ageism, and other forms of oppression that make for an untenable work environment.

**Navigating Sites of Qualitative Animosity**

My focus is individuals in these hostile environments because their circumstances often go unaddressed while their conditions warrant real and practical considerations. In the following section, I discuss possible directions for those who find themselves in these environments.

*Prioritize Community*

Spaces hostile to qualitative research are likely cruel and isolating cultures for those educators most impacted by them. One such way to mitigate the deleterious impact of spaces unreceptive to qualitative research is through community. Prioritizing community means making sure you are immersed in collectives that support qualitative scholars and provide opportunities for camaraderie.

Scholars, for example, may find it especially useful to stay connected and communicate routinely with their peers outside of their institution that specialize in qualitative research. It is likely within antagonistic spaces; people wonder if their observations are as harmful as they seem. Such a support system can help a person make sense of what they are experiencing and normalize that they are not crazy for noticing their hostile work environment.

In considering ways to expand one's qualitative community, it may be beneficial to join an association or special interest group within an association that focuses on qualitative research. Some of these groups host in-person and virtual gatherings to convene. These meetings and activities can also provide a space that illustrates the significance and vitality of qualitative scholarship and teaching.

Community is essential for keeping one's conditions in perspective. The hostile school, department, or space in question is one environment and not the sum total of academia or the field. I was trained in a department that had a strong presence of qualitative research and scholars, so I also understood that not every environment has a violent positioning towards qualitative research. Supportive qualitative community can serve as a reminder and recognition that one inimical environment is not reflective of one's entire field, let alone the array of departments across the social sciences and humanities.

*Recognize Your Role is Not to Defend the Legitimacy of Qualitative Research*

Qualitative scholars may recognize that much is stacked up against them in being a qualitatively-oriented academic while teaching in an environment that is unsupportive of qualitative inquiry. As previous sections illumine; qualitative courses and instructors are sabotaged through directed disparagement, academic bullying/mobbing, and lack of resources. Accordingly, an

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unfortunate result of such a climate is that "qualitative researchers are placed on the defensive (Given, 2017, p. 1)." I chose not to center my pedagogy and practices around those who came to the course ready to devalue qualitative research. My ethos was that I am there to ensure each student receives a world class education, but my role is not to teach the content from the vantage point that it is inherently inferior or that I have to prove myself and the research tradition to every contemptuous student.

Realizing that there were graduate students that brought many concerning beliefs, attitudes and behaviors to an introductory course, I assigned a reflection assignment early on to allow students the opportunity to explore the beliefs and paradigms that influence how they see the world, research, and moreover qualitative research. Many students in doing so noted they had not previously considered their ideologies, worldviews, paradigms, and biases; let alone realize they are important for understanding how they come to the research enterprise. Over the course of time, a plethora admitted through the assignment they became aware of their assumptions and how this colored their disposition and behavior in the course. While this activity did not deter those students committed to undermining myself and the learning environment, for others it made them realize they were potentially thwarting their own academic development.

### Bring Your Light to the Space

For those confronted with teaching in such a reality, there may be an appeal to dull the work to match the lackluster and hostile energy of the space. Moreover, when confronted with an environment harsh to qualitative work, one might feel temped to teach such a vibrant and complex tradition in a manner that is muted and void of its richness to avert additional criticism. I argue that, in these environments, it is all the more important to impart nuance and excitement in the work.

One way to maintain enthusiasm in these climates is to bring yourself to the work and the innovation and possibilities that follow. For example, in my scholarship, I theorized that memes are a useful tool for qualitative research (Iloh, 2021b). Understanding that my premise also had pedagogical power, I have students in my all courses create memes that illustrate and summarize their learning experience at the end. Not only is this a fun, relevant, and dynamic assignment; it also allows students to reflect on the myriad of ways they learned and built momentum. In another example, while teaching about snowball sampling in an introductory qualitative course, I played an excerpt from the song "Big Poppa" by the Notorious B.I.G to illustrate the "friend-of-friend" aspect of this sampling approach. These activities reflect pivotal decisions I made to not let my environment lower my zeal and passion for qualitative inquiry, particularly in the classroom. Through such examples, I was able to capitalize on the immense social-relevance (Iloh, 2021b; Iloh & Connor, 2021) of qualitative inquiry and my connection to it.

*Consider an Exit Plan*

It can be taxing to navigate, let alone exist in, ecosystems that are unhealthy for qualitative course instructors. One's own well-being could wane and deteriorate while having to teach and research under duress and constraints. Accordingly, scholars must constantly take inventory of the spiritual, physical, psychological, and mental toll of working and teaching in spaces that have enmity towards their teaching and scholarship (Iloh, 2021a). As scholars continue to endure and weigh the costs of inhabiting such spaces, leaving may be a viable option.

This direction is one that also requires serious reflection and assessment. The necessity of an exit may result in a local move to another department within the institution or a move to another institution. Departure can also include pursuing other career options that leverage that person's skills. It is worth noting that some who may wish to exit may not because departing may not be feasible geographically, financially, or for any other reasons circumstantially.

I present exiting as option to acknowledge one's purpose in higher education is not to try to survive in harmful conditions to which they are not responsible (Iloh, 2019, 2020, 2021c). Moreover, fixing spaces with pervasive methodological and epistemological ills is not their additional burden to carry. Scholars in general, and in this case qualitative scholars and educators, are worthy of work environments that welcome and support their research tradition and expertise. It should be normalized that scholars do not have to endure abuse and labor more in service to an already toxic culture and environment.

**Conclusion**

Three things are essential in understanding the urgency of this text. First, exposure to qualitative research and qualitative training is not only important for the production of qualitative research but also the consumption and critique of it. Second, teaching at its best should be a liberatory and safe dynamic for both the instructor and student. Third, environments that are hostile to qualitative research and scholars who teach it jeopardize and threaten the two former statements. Violent and unsupportive arenas for qualitative research are a catalyst for deleterious messages and innumerable consequences. Such spaces communicate qualitative researchers are less deserving of respect, professionalism, support, and decency. Moreover, these cultures and environments embolden a trajectory of harm, scrutiny, and harassment of qualitative scholars and scholarship. While more than just words are necessary to eliminate these ills, this text serves as a recognition of the ongoing methodological causalities we cannot afford.

**Author's Short Biography**

Dr. Constance Iloh is an anthropologist devoted to illuminating asymmetries, forms of oppression, and inequities embedded in organizations and social institutions. Constance's recent publication, "Academia as an Incubator of Oppression and Violence: A Closer Look at Academic Mobbing and Bullying Offline and Online" appears in Humanities and Social Science Research. Iloh, a recognized social scientist and qualitative methodologist, is particularly passionate about the possibilities of qualitative inquiry in 21st century research. Her article "Do it for the Culture: The Case for Memes in Qualitative Research," is published in the International Journal of Qualitative Methods. Constance's work has been featured by NPR, Politico, the American Association of University Women (AAUW), the University Innovation Alliance, the Chronicle, the Institute of Higher Education, and NBC Universal. Iloh routinely appears in Diverse Issues in Higher Education as a contributing writer. Dr. Iloh's website is www.constanceiloh.com.

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