Beyond Paradigm & Method

5 Articles on the Fundamental Role of Quality Principles in Qualitative Research Design

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The contents of this compilation include a selection of 5 articles appearing in
Research Design Review from 2014 to 2022 concerning various aspects related to the fundamental role
of quality principles in qualitative research design regardless of paradigm orientation or method.
Excerpts and links may be used, provided that the proper citation is given.

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The Transcendence of Quality Over Paradigms in Qualitative Research

A graduate course in qualitative research methods may be framed around discussions of the particular theoretical or philosophical paradigms – belief systems or world view – that qualitative researchers use in varying degrees to orient their approach for any given study. And, indeed, if the instructor is using popular texts such as those from **Norman Denzin** and **Yvonna Lincoln** (2018) or **John Creswell** and **Cheryl Poth** (2018), students would be learning first about the different implications and approaches associated with various paradigm orientations, followed by (or along with) the corresponding methodological considerations.

There have been over the years debates in the academic qualitative research community about how best to identify and talk about these paradigms as well as quality concerns related to conducting research based around any one of these belief systems. In the broadest sense, the most oft-discussed paradigms in qualitative research are: postpositivism – often allied with a more quantitative approach where the emphasis is on maintaining objectivity and controlling variables in order to approximate "reality"; constructivism or interpretivism – in which the belief is not hinged to one objective reality but multiple realities that are socially constructed based on subjective meanings; and critical theory – where the focus is on bringing about social change for the marginalized or oppressed (e.g., issues related to racism, classism, or sexism) by way of a localized, fully collaborative approach.

It is these underlying paradigm orientations that fuel further discussions concerning what it means to conduct a "quality" qualitative study. **Clara Hill's "consensual qualitative research"** – that is grounded somewhere between postpositivism and constructivism, and prescribes a highly-specific method – is just one example.

It is not at all clear, however, that the researcher needs a paradigm-bound research design where one set of criteria pertains to one orientation but not to another. As important as a theoretical or philosophical orientation may be to serving as the foundation to a qualitative research effort, it need not be tied to the quality measures the researcher utilizes in the actual *doing* of the research. In fact, the quality aspects of a research design should transcend, or at least be a separate discussion from, the consideration of paradigms. Regardless of the philosophical thinking that supports

the approach, all qualitative research necessitates an implementation that maximizes the study's credibility, analyzability, transparency, and ultimate usefulness to the research team, the end users, as well as the research community as a whole. This type of quality framework is discussed more fully **here**.

As discussed many times in this blog and elsewhere, qualitative research is complex and deserving of a varied and complex debate on any number of aspects. This complexity, however, unites us in our commitment to building quality components into our research designs so that all of us – no matter our theoretical/philosophical understanding of what it means to engage qualitative research – can realize our objectives.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Image captured from http://appalachianson.wordpress.com/2013/09/16/join-hands-unite-the-riot/ on 26 February 2014.

Distinguishing Qualitative Research Methods from Paradigm Orientation

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 17-20).

A good deal has been written about paradigms in qualitative research as they relate to assessing quality (Greene, 1994; Lather, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005; Patton, 1978; Ponterotto, 2013; Rolfe, 2006). Some scholars, such as Rolfe (2006), start from the premise that "any attempt to establish a consensus on quality criteria for qualitative research is unlikely to succeed for the simple reason that there is no unified body or theory [i.e., an accepted paradigm], methodology or method that can collectively be described as qualitative research; indeed, [I believe] that the *very idea* of qualitative research is open to question" (p. 305).

Rolfe opines that "if there is no unified qualitative research paradigm, then it makes little sense to attempt to establish a set of generic criteria for making quality judgments about qualitative research studies" (2006, p. 304). This line of thinking, however, confounds attention to methods and attention to theory, when each deserves to be considered separately.

While the idea that there is no paradigm capable of encompassing all of qualitative research has merit in its own right, it has nothing to do with how well the methods that are used to generate qualitative research data and findings are conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated.

The belief that qualitative research design—its procedures and various components—transcends or is otherwise separate from a discussion of paradigm orientations has been discussed **elsewhere in *Research Design Review*** and is an idea shared by many scholars. For example, it is an idea espoused by Morse et al. (2002), who believe that "core research procedures . . . can act as a self-correcting mechanism to ensure the quality of the project" (p. 14), a consideration that goes beyond the debate about paradigms. Morse et al.'s position is supported by Patton (1999, 2002) when he stresses the need to focus on the "appropriateness of methods" rather than the "adherence to some absolute orthodoxy that declares one or the other approach to be inherently preferred" (1999, p. 1206). It is also a position consistent

with Miles and Huberman (1984), who state that "it is important not to confuse the systematic use of tools with one's epistemological position" (p. 21).

Ponterotto (2013) and Morrow (2005) champion the same view when they talk about specific aspects of qualitative research design that transcend paradigm orientation—such as ethical concerns and researcher competencies (Ponterotto), and the subjective nature of qualitative research along with the adequacy and interpretation of data (Morrow). Furthermore, Guba and Lincoln (1994) support the idea of the distinctiveness of methodological issues in relation to philosophical paradigms, distinguishing "questions of method" from "questions of paradigm" (p. 105); as does Lincoln et al. (2011), who identify two kinds of rigor—the "application of method" and the "salience to one interpretation over another" (p. 120); and others who maintain the notion that validity and validation pertain throughout the research process regardless of approach (Creswell, 2013; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Morse et al., 2002; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001).

The **Total Quality Framework (TQF)** focuses on issues related to the methodological choices that qualitative researchers make (or fail to make) in their efforts to generate data that are fit for the purposes for which a study is intended. In this way, the TQF is directed at the basic question of "How is qualitative research conducted?" and supported by the idea that

If, philosophically, the goodness of qualitative research is of ultimate concern, and if it is agreed that qualitative research can, in fact, serve worthwhile (i.e., "good") purposes, then logically it would serve those purposes only to the degree that it is done well, regardless of the specific objectives that qualitative researchers are striving to address. (Roller & Lavrakas, p. 20)

Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Greene, J. C. (1994). Qualitative program evaluation: Practice and promise. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 530–544). Sage Publications.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105–117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Lather, P. (2004). Critical inquiry in qualitative research: Feminist and poststructual perspectives: Science "after truth." In K. DeMarrais & S. D. Lapan (Eds.), *Foundations for research: Methods of inquiry in education and the social sciences* (pp. 203–215). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2011). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 97–128). Sage Publications.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). Drawing valid meaning from qualitative data: Toward a shared craft. *Educational Researcher*, *13*(5), 20–30.

Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *52*(2), 250–260.

Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *1*(2), 13–22.

Patton, M. Q. (1978). *Utilization-focused evaluation*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Patton, M. Q. (1999). Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *Health Services Research*, *34*(5 Pt 2), 1189–1208.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Ponterotto, J. G. (2013). Qualitative research in multicultural psychology: Philosophical underpinnings, popular approaches, and ethical considerations. *Qualitative Psychology*, *1*(S).

Rolfe, G. (2006). Validity, trustworthiness and rigour: Quality and the idea of qualitative research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *53*(3), 304–310.

Roller, M. R., & Lavrakas, P. J. (2015). *Applied qualitative research design: A total quality framework approach*. New York: Guilford Press.

Whittemore, R., Chase, S. K., & Mandle, C. L. (2001). Validity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research*, *11*(4), 522–537.

Image captured from: http://www.mariestudios.com/abstract-gallery.html

From the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology: A Principled Approach to Research Design

The February 2017 issue of *Qualitative Psychology*, the journal of the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology (SQIP, a section of Division 5 of the American Psychological Association) starts off with an article titled **"Recommendations for Designing and Reviewing Qualitative Research in Psychology: Promoting Methodological Integrity"** (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017). This paper is a report from the SQIP Task Force on Resources for the Publication of Qualitative Research whose purpose it is "to provide resources to support the design and evaluation of qualitative research" and, by way of this paper, offers "a systematic methodological framework that can be useful for reviewers and authors as they design and evaluate research projects" (p. 7).

Importantly, the "methodological framework" recommended by the authors is decidedly not a procedural playbook and not a checklist or a how-to guide. Giving researchers "rules" to follow by way of this or any other framework would be illogical for the simple reason that those who design and evaluate qualitative research do so across a variety of methods as well as from any number of paradigms or orientations, e.g., post-positivist, constructivist-interpretive, critical-ideological, phenomenological, pragmatic, and performative inquiry (Levitt, et al., 2017). Therefore, the generic model offered by the authors is appropriately respectful of the "diversity and complexities of qualitative research" while also encouraging researchers to embrace the inherent benefits – such as flexibility and multi-method solutions – of qualitative inquiry and deemphasizing a more restrictive method-centric approach to research design. In this way, the authors' framework asks qualitative researchers to focus on the research *question* in the development and evaluation of qualitative research rather than any particular *method*.

The recommended framework is grounded in the concept of "methodological integrity" which pertains to the trustworthiness of a research study from the standpoint of methodological principles, including adherence to the research goals, the researcher's philosophical orientation or perspective, and the phenomenon under investigation. Methodological integrity consists of two functioning components: "fidelity to the subject matter" and "utility in achieving goals." The area of fidelity

considers how well variations in the subject matter have been captured in the research by way of comprehensive and diverse data sources that adequately reveal variations of a phenomenon, how well the researcher's interpretations are derived from "good quality" data, and how well the researcher has reached out beyond his/her own perspective during the data collection and analysis processes. With respect to the latter, a recommended practice is **reflexivity** such as the use and reporting of the researcher's reflexive journal.

The other component of the recommended framework is the utility of achieving goals. The concept of utility in this context has to do with such issues as: whether interpretations of the data are sufficiently contextualized (i.e., attention is given to the specific context – e.g., location, culture, time period – in which research findings, and *variations* in research findings, are based); whether the data collection process was maximized to foster insightful analyses (e.g., reducing the potential for interviewer bias); whether the findings extend "meaningful contributions" to the research goals or questions by, for example, challenging or expanding on current notions in the literature; and whether the researcher examined deviant cases or outliers in the data and discussed the sense making of research findings in this context.

In essence, the authors' methodological framework is a principled approach that gives qualitative researchers a way to think carefully about the integrity of qualitative research data collection and analysis regardless of the method or the researcher's "world view." Similar to the **Total Quality Framework** (TQF), the SQIP task force has not provided a step-by-step *prescription* for how researchers should go about their research (or rules reviewers should follow when evaluating qualitative studies) but rather a foundation by which researchers can *conceptualize* and *think* about the trustworthiness of their research in terms of the quality aspects associated with data collection (or **"Credibility"** in the TQF) and data analysis (or **"Analyzability"** in the TQF), including the adequacy of reporting that reveals the application of these quality standards (or **"Transparency"** in the TQF). Ultimately, this principled approach boils down to the pragmatic question of how useful the research findings are in responding to the research goals (or **"Usefulness"** in the TQF).

The authors' promotion of methodological integrity is a much needed and welcome addition to the discussion of qualitative research design. Their recommended approach will hopefully shine a light on a way to think about quality principles in qualitative research design among psychologists as well as qualitative researchers in other disciplines.

Levitt, H. M., Motulsky, S. L., Wertz, F. J., Morrow, S. L., & Ponterotto, J. G. (2017). Recommendations for designing and reviewing qualitative research in psychology: Promoting methodological integrity. *Qualitative Psychology*, *4*(1), 2–22.

Critical Thinking in Qualitative Research Design

The following is a modified excerpt from <u>Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach</u> *(Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 20-21).*

Many researchers and scholars have advanced strategies, criteria, or frameworks for thinking about and promoting the importance of "the quality" of qualitative research at some stage in the research design. One such strategy is the **framework developed by Levitt et al. (2017)** that centers on methodological integrity. Another is the Total Quality Framework (TQF) which has been discussed throughout *Research Design Review*, as in the article titled **"The 'Quality' in Qualitative Research Debate & the Total Quality Framework."**

The strategies or ways of thinking about quality in qualitative research that are most relevant to the TQF are those that are (a) paradigm neutral, (b) flexible (i.e., do not adhere to a defined method), and (c) applicable to all phases of the research process. Among these, the work of Lincoln and Guba (e.g., 1981, 1985, 1986, and 1995) is the most noteworthy. Although they profess a paradigm orientation "of the constructionist camp, loosely defined" (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 116), the quality criteria Lincoln and Guba set forth nearly 30 years ago is particularly pertinent to the TQF in that it advances the concept of trustworthiness as a major criterion for judging whether a qualitative research study is "rigorous." In their model, trustworthiness addresses the issue of "How can a [qualitative researcher] persuade [someone] that the findings of a [study] are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). That is, what are the criteria upon which such an assessment should be based? In this way, Lincoln and Guba espouse standards that are flexible (i.e., can be adapted depending on the research context) as well as relevant throughout the research process.

In answering, they put forth the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. For Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility is the extent to which the findings of a qualitative research study are internally valid (i.e., accurate). Credibility is established through (a) prolonged engagement, (b) persistent observation, (c) triangulation, (d) peer debriefings, (e) negative case analysis, (f) referential adequacy, and (g) member checks. Transferability refers to the extent to which other researchers or users of the research can determine the applicability of

the research design and/or the study findings to other research contexts (e.g., other participants, places, and times). Transferability is primarily established through thick description that is "necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). Thick description and transferability are key elements of the TQF Transparency component.

Dependability is the degree to which an independent "auditor" can look at the qualitative research process and determine its "acceptability" and, in so doing, create an audit trail of the process. To that end, the **Transparency component of the TQF** deals directly with the idea of providing the user of the research with an audit trail pertaining to all aspects of the research in the final research document. Confirmability refers to utilizing the same dependability audit to examine the evidence in the data that purportedly supports the researcher's findings, interpretations, and recommendations.

Regardless of the quality framework researchers use, **the important objective is to stretch researchers' understanding of how design decisions impact the integrity of qualitative data**. By developing these kinds of critical thinking skills, researchers ensure a quality approach that ultimately delivers useful outcomes to the users of the research.

Guba, E. G. (1981). Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *Educational Communication and Technology Journal*, *29*(2), 75–91.

Levitt, H. M., Motulsky, S. L., Wertz, F. J., Morrow, S. L., & Ponterotto, J. G. (2017). Recommendations for designing and reviewing qualitative research in psychology: Promoting methodological integrity. *Qualitative Psychology*, *4*(1), 2–22. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000082

Lincoln, Y. S. (1995). Emerging criteria for quality in qualitative and interpretive research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *1*(3), 275–289. https://doi.org/10.1177/107780049500100301

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1986). But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. *New Directions for Program Evaluation*, *30*(1), 73–84.

Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2011). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 97–128). Sage Publications.

Roller, M. R., & Lavrakas, P. J. (2015). *Applied qualitative research design: A total quality framework approach*. New York: Guilford Press.

Image captured from: https://www.wabisabilearning.com/blog/critical-thinking-questions-subject

Exploring Human Realities: A Quality & Fair Approach

The following incorporates modified excerpts from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 2-3).

As the channel by which researchers explore the depths of human realities, qualitative research has gained prominent status that is accelerating over time as quantitatively trained mentors in academia are increasingly asked to assist in students' qualitative research designs, and as the volume of published works in qualitative research aggressively grows (cf. Charmaz, 2008; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Silverman, 2013). Even psychology, a discipline that has traditionally dismissed qualitative research as "subjective" and "unscientific," has come of age with slow but continued growth in the field of qualitative psychology (cf. Wertz, 2014). These advances have given rise to a vibrant array of scholars and practitioners who harbor varying perspectives on how to approach qualitative research.

These differing perspectives are best exemplified by the **paradigm debates** among qualitative researchers. The focus of these debates is on the underlying belief or orientation the researcher brings to any given qualitative study. In particular, these discussions center on the philosophical constructs related to the nature of reality (ontology) and that of knowledge (epistemology). It is the researchers' sometimes divergent views on the presence and extent of a "true" reality—for example, whether it is the (post)positivism view that there is a single objective reality that can be found in a controlled scientific method, or the constructivism–interpretivism paradigm that emphasizes the idea of multiple realities existing in the context of social interactions and subjective meanings—as well as the source of this knowledge—for example, the dominant role of the researcher in **critical theory**—that have fueled an ongoing dialogue concerning paradigms within the qualitative research arena.

And yet, regardless of the philosophical or theoretical paradigms that may guide researchers in their qualitative inquiries, qualitative researchers are united in the fundamental and common goal of unraveling the convoluted and intricate world of the human experience.

The complexities of the human experience present unique challenges to qualitative researchers who strive to develop research designs that result in contextual data

while incorporating basic standards of good research. To that end, many qualitative researchers, routinely focus their attention on the importance of methodically rigorous data collection practices and verification checks (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002); well-thought-out procedures and analytic rigor (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006; Berg & Lune, 2012), and frameworks that promote critical thinking throughout the research process (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

By transcending the paradigm debates, a quality approach to qualitative research fosters the essential element of fairness while maximizing the ultimate usefulness of the research. Fairness means giving participants a fair voice in the research. A "fair voice" is not a small q positivist-Big Q non-positivist issue (see Braun & Clarke, 2022) but rather **the researcher's quality approach to data collection and analysis that gives careful consideration to the scope of the sample design, researchers' skills that prioritize inclusion, ongoing reflexivity, and other quality research strategies that embrace diversity in our participants and our methods**.

A quality approach that promotes fairness to explore the complexity of human realities is a non-debatable goal of the qualitative researcher.

Atkinson, P., & Delamont, S. (2006). Rescuing narrative from qualitative research. *Narrative Inquiry*, *16*(1), 164–172. https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.16.1.21atk

Berg, B. L., & Lune, H. (2012). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (8th ed.). Boston: Pearson.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and be(com)ing a knowing researcher. *International Journal of Transgender Health*. https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597

Charmaz, K. (2008). Views from the margins: Voices, silences, and suffering. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *5*(1), 7–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780880701863518

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Levitt, H. M., Motulsky, S. L., Wertz, F. J., Morrow, S. L., & Ponterotto, J. G. (2017). Recommendations for designing and reviewing qualitative research in psychology: Promoting methodological integrity. *Qualitative Psychology*, *4*(1), 2–22. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000082

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Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2011). *Designing qualitative reserach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *1*(2), 13–22.

Roller, M. R., & Lavrakas, P. J. (2015). *Applied qualitative research design: A total quality framework approach*. New York: Guilford Press.

Silverman, D. (2013). What counts as qualitative research? Some cautionary comments. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, *IX*(2), 48–55.

Wertz, F. J. (2014). Qualitative inquiry in the history of psychology. *Qualitative Psychology*, *1*(1), 4–16.