

The Meaning & Essence of Qualitative Research

Five Articles from *Research Design Review*
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Research Design Review – www.researchdesignreview.com– is a blog first published in November 2009. RDR currently includes more than 200 articles concerning quantitative and qualitative research design issues. As in recent years, the articles published in 2018 generally revolved around qualitative research. The five articles included in this paper focus on fundamental aspects of the qualitative research approach, including the meaning researchers give to qualitative research and whether researchers are really conducting qualitative “research” or uncovering qualitative “information.” These articles also address the idea that a discussion of qualitative methods is a separate discussion from that of paradigm orientation, and two articles are directed at what it means to be “literate” in the distinctive requirements of qualitative research design and how rigor throughout the quality chain results in useful information by way of new hypotheses, next steps, and/or applications to other contexts.

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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, emphasis in original).

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?” 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.

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.

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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.

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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.

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>

What is Your Meaning of “Qualitative Research”?

There is good reason to wonder what researchers mean when they talk about “qualitative research.” This is not a trite bemusement. Indeed, there is often an unspoken underlying premise in most discussions of “qualitative research” that researchers harbor a mutually agreed-to concept of what qualitative research is, when in fact this is not the case. Attend a qualitative research conference session and you will find that the presenter predictably delves into the particular subject matter without a hint of the researcher’s definition of “qualitative research,” leaving attendees with the arduous (and misguided) task of linking their own concept of qualitative research with the presenter’s discussion.



There are a number of ways that researchers may conceptualize or define qualitative research. For instance, some may define qualitative research simply by its **unique set of methods**, e.g., focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, ethnography; whereby, a focus group study is deemed qualitative research regardless of the skills of the moderator or how the data are treated or reported to end users. Similarly, qualitative research may be understood solely by the interview format, e.g., a semi-structured in-depth interview (IDI) constitutes qualitative research while a structured IDI not so much (and actually leans towards a more quantitative approach).

Another understanding of qualitative research may center on the **intent or types of questions** being asked. For example, I have heard quantitative researchers refer to their design decisions (such as weighing project costs with research quality) as qualitative research. And some researchers may think that any approach that is self-reflective in nature (such as autoethnography) is qualitative research. Some researchers also use labels such as “qualitative survey” or “qualitative questionnaire” which serves to brand their study “qualitative research.”

And yet another definition of qualitative research resides in the **data itself**; that is, any non-numerical dataset may be deemed qualitative research. This includes the many researchers who believe the use of open-ended questions in a survey questionnaire is the qualitative component of their research. This also includes the researcher who associates any text and/or image research data as qualitative data and, ipso facto, qualitative research. An important but unfortunate consequence of these data-driven interpretations of qualitative research is the tendency for the researcher to treat qualitative data as discrete bits of information to be pushed around and manipulated much like survey data.

What is missing from all these interpretations of qualitative research is the essence of what qualitative research *is*. The methods that are used, the questions that are asked, and the resulting data make qualitative research unique but they don’t define what qualitative research is. Qualitative

is not one (or more) of these almost tangible things but rather an intricate approach that respects the fundamental truism that conducting research with human beings is complicated.

“Qualitative research is about making connections. It is about understanding that good research involving human beings cannot be anything but complex, and that delving beyond the obvious or the expedient is a necessary tactic in order to understand how one facet of something adds meaning to some other facet, both of which lead the researcher to insights on this complexity... Qualitative research celebrates the fact that the complexities and intricacies—the connections—revealed at any one moment may or may not exist in another moment in time, reflecting the ever-changing reality of being human.” (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 2).

To ignore this basic tenet of qualitative research is to ignore why we conduct qualitative research in the first place. Here, I am not talking about the need for a particular theoretical orientation to qualitative research or personal paradigms but rather the importance of paying attention to the *raison d’être* for qualitative research itself.

For instance, calling open-ended questions/responses “qualitative research” overlooks the fact that these open-ended questions/responses exist within the confined context of a highly structured survey questionnaire. Similarly, performing statistical manipulations (e.g., correlations) and building data visuals (e.g., bar graphs), based on rating scales or frequencies, rests on certain assumptions such as normality and independence; thereby ignoring sample design issues in qualitative research, the less structured nature of qualitative research methods, as well as the contextual and nuance qualities associated with qualitative data.

This is why I begin all my qualitative presentations and workshops with a discussion of what I believe qualitative is.* It is not just a distinctive set of methods or formats, it is not just the intent or types of questions we want to ask, and it is not just non-numerical data. Underlying all of that is the “messy” reality of [qualitative research’s unique attributes](#). To understand that is to understand my approach to qualitative research which in turn frames the context for thinking about how to apply basic research principles to qualitative research design.

*And I encourage other researchers to define their meaning of “qualitative research” at the outset of their presentations in order to help frame their discussions.

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

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Reflections on “Qualitative Literacy”

In March 2018, [Mario Luis Small](#) gave a public lecture at Columbia University on [“Rhetoric and Evidence in a Polarized Society.”](#) In this



terrific must-read speech, Small asserts that today’s public discourse concerning society’s most deserving issues – poverty, inequality, and economic opportunity – has been seriously weakened by the absence of “qualitative literacy.” Qualitative literacy has to do with “the ability to understand, handle, and properly interpret qualitative evidence” such as ethnographic and in-depth interview (IDI) data. Small contrasts the general lack of *qualitative* literacy with the “remarkable improvement” in “*quantitative* literacy” particularly among

those in the media where data-driven journalism is on the rise, published stories are written with a greater knowledge of quantitative data and use of terminology (e.g., the inclusion of means *and* medians), and more care is given to the quantitative evidence cited in media commentary (i.e., op-eds).

Small explains that the extent to which a researcher (or journalist or anyone involved in the use of research) possesses qualitative literacy can be determined by looking at the person’s ability to “assess whether the ethnographer has collected and evaluated fieldnote data properly, or the interviewer has conducted interviews effectively and analyzed the transcripts properly.” This determination serves as the backbone of “basic qualitative literacy” which enables the research user to identify the difference between a rigorous qualitative study and a study that applied weak or less rigorous standards. And it is this basic literacy – which has advanced the public discourse of *quantitative* data – that is needed in the *qualitative* realm.

One of the ways users of qualitative research can effectively assess the quality of a reported study, according to Small, is the show of “cognitive empathy.” Small’s definition of cognitive empathy is not unlike the message from many articles in *Research Design Review* that discuss a central objective among all qualitative researchers; that is, understanding how people think*. Essentially, cognitive empathy boils down to the researcher’s ability to record the participant’s lived experience from the *participant’s* not the *researcher’s* point of view by way of understanding how the *participant* not the *researcher* thinks about a particular experience or situation.

Small does not discuss reflexive journals and the important impact they can have on aiding the qualitative researcher to gain the cognitive empathy the researcher seeks. Yet reflexivity and the reflexive journal play an important role in rigorous qualitative research designs. The reflexive journal has been discussed many times in *RDR* as one component (of many) to a quality approach to qualitative design. One such article is [“Interviewer Bias & Reflexivity in Qualitative Research”](#) which discusses the concept of reflexivity and how a heightened awareness of reflexivity “enables the interviewer to design specific questions for the interviewee that help inform and clarify the interviewer’s understanding of the outcomes” from the interviewee’s perspective. A subsequent

article on the reflexive journal – [“Reflections from the Field: Questions to Stimulate Reflexivity Among Qualitative Researchers”](#) – offers specific questions or issues that encourage qualitative researchers to think about how they may be unintentionally influencing (biasing) their data and how they might modify their approach.

Without this reflection – without this true grasp of cognitive empathy – researchers weaken their studies by failing to internalize their participants’ lived experiences. With respect to public discourse, this failure in cognitive empathy can cripple our ability to comprehend, as Small says, “why people at the opposite end [of the political spectrum] think, vote, or otherwise act the way they do.”

* A few of these articles can be accessed in [this 2014 post](#).

Image captured from: <https://scholar.harvard.edu/mariosmall/about>

Quality Qualitative Research: As Strong As Its Weakest Link

The [Total Quality Framework](#) (TQF) is rooted in the idea that a quality approach to qualitative research requires “quality thinking” at each stage of the research process. It is an idea derived from the logic that it is not good enough to think carefully about data collection without also thinking as carefully about the analysis and reporting phases while keeping a discerning eye on the ultimate goal of gaining useful research results. This fundamental concept underlies the TQF and serves to define its four components – [Credibility](#) (pertaining to the data collection phase), [Analyzability](#) (analysis), and [Transparency](#) (reporting), and [Usefulness](#) (being able to do something of value with the outcomes).



By considering quality standards *at each step* in the research design, qualitative researchers maintain the integrity of their data *through the entire* study thereby producing something of value to the users of their research. For instance, a concerted quality approach to data collection – an approach that mitigates researcher bias and gathers valid data – but a disregard for the quality process in the analysis phase – e.g., transcripts are poorly done, coding is inconsistent, and verification of the data is absent – weakens the entire study. Likewise, a deliberate quality approach to data collection and analysis but a failure to write a transparent final document that reveals the details of the study’s scope, data gathering, analysis process and verification, effectively masks the integrity of the research and undermines its critical value to users.

A holistic quality-centric approach to qualitative research design essentially means that a weakness in any one link in the quality chain – the chain from data collection to analysis to reporting – erodes *the* purpose of conducting qualitative research (regardless of method) which is to offer useful information by way of new hypotheses, next steps, and/or applications to other contexts.

Image captured from: <https://www.quora.com/Are-covalent-network-solids-stronger-than-ionic-bonds-in-regards-to-intermolecular-forces>

Distinguishing Between “Qualitative Information” & “Qualitative Research”

A qualitative study that utilizes interviews, group discussions, and/or observations is not necessarily a piece of research. There are many instances when reported exercises in qualitative gathering are

labeled qualitative research when in fact the results may have provided interesting qualitative information but are not research findings that can be relied on to confidently guide hypotheses or next steps.



The distinction lies in the rigor of the design and implementation of the data gathering and analysis processes. Qualitative *research* (like all research) adheres to [certain standards in the research protocol to maximize the integrity and ultimate usefulness of the data](#). Qualitative *information*, on the other hand, uses what appears to be similar

methods but without the attention to basic research principles required to lay the foundation and support for the integrity of the outcomes.

As just one example, there was a study published in a peer-reviewed journal a few years back that reported on the use of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews to investigate primary care providers’ (PCPs’) perceptions and practices related to cognitive health.

In terms of **sampling**: 1) the researchers relied heavily on convenience sampling, e.g., recruiting from clinics where they had connections and soliciting interest among conference attendees; 2) there was no screening process by which to select participants from interested individuals; and 3) everyone who showed up to participate was accepted.

In terms of **coverage**: 1) less than half of the PCPs’ patients were 65 years of age or older and less than one fourth of these patients had been given any dementia-related diagnosis. This is important because these characteristics of the participant pool may have impacted the analysis and main takeaways; and 2) the researchers suggest that cooperation may have been low – e.g., when only one person showed up for a focus group, the researchers simply conducted a one-on-one interview with that participant – which begs the question, ‘Who did not cooperate (i.e., show up to participate) and how are these people the same or different than those who did?’

In terms of **data gathering**: 1) instead of a fully designed [research guide](#), the researchers asked participants to simply react to a brief case study followed by two main questions concerning cognitive health; 2) instead of using probing and clarification skills to engage participants and unearth their responses to all questions, interviewers allowed participants to answer a question different from the one that was asked; and 3) the researchers make no mention of the participant composition in their focus group discussions yet the composition of participants in a focus group discussion plays an important role in determining the course of discussion and the integrity of the data.

In terms of **analysis** and discussion, the researchers do not appear to have made a serious attempt to analyze their data from the perspective of the sampling, coverage, and data gathering limitations of their study, leaving the reader with a low level of confidence in the key findings, and a sense that the study produced some interesting information but not research outcomes that contribute meaningful knowledge to the research issue.

Distinguishing between qualitative *information* and qualitative *research* takes a certain amount of, what Mario Luis Small has called, “qualitative literacy.” As discussed in [an earlier RDR post](#), qualitative literacy “enables the research user to identify the difference between a rigorous qualitative study and a study that applied weak or less rigorous standards.” Greater qualitative literacy should enable researchers to understand – during the design, data gathering, and analysis phases – whether they have conducted an exercise in gathering *information* that may be interesting for consideration or qualitative *research* that confidently moves the user closer to answering the research question.

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