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A Defense and Justification of Qualitative Research*

By

Mary Katherine O'Connor, Ph.D.
Professor
School of Social Work
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, VA
mkoconno@vcu.edu

and

F. Ellen Netting, Ph.D.
Professor
School of Social Work
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, VA
enetting@vcu.edu

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A Defense and Justification of Qualitative Research

Introduction

What we are about to say is built on the assumption that, to some degree qualitative researchers have failed to articulate their defensible contributions to knowledge building in social sciences. It is beyond the scope of this short paper to discuss the depth and breadth of the raging ontological and epistemological debates that pit qualitative methods against quantitative methods for practice evaluation and other research (see Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Tyson, 1995). The basic reason for this conference is in some way to refute current trends of rejecting qualitative methods as not useful because they are not recognized as scientific, owing to lack of acceptable levels of rigor (among other criticisms). We believe that it is not useful to discuss whether or not quantitative and qualitative studies actually represent different paradigmatic perspectives, or whether they are simply methods that can be chosen to guide an inquiry process, regardless of paradigmatic assumptions (see Creswell, 1994; Rodwell, 1998). Nor is it necessary to delve into a critical examination of generalizability and its use and misuse, regardless of method (see Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Lee & Baskerville, 2003; Rosenberg, 1993). These controversies, though important in the overall development of knowledge, are irrelevant for this discussion of the worth and standards for qualitative research methods. What we intend here is to clarify the appropriate uses of qualitative methods in a variety of research contexts because we believe that qualitative social scientists have not made a clear case for the usefulness of qualitative approaches in

human subjects research.

Beyond the ontological and epistemological debates that have pitted qualitative against quantitative methods are internal debates within the qualitative research field regarding measures to evaluate qualitative studies (Lather, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Seale, 2002). Aside from those who see a need and the possibility of developing quality criteria parallel to quantitative processes (Huberman & Miles, 1994; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982), the positions regarding what is necessary seem to fit into two camps: those who think researchers should abandon "the pursuit of autonomous, indisputable criteria for distinguishing legitimate from not so legitimate social scientific knowledge" (Schwandt, 1996, p. 70); and those who take the position like Bloland (1995) that there is no need to develop any valid criteria because it is not possible. All these discussions must face the pragmatic fact of accountability to funding sources and research participants and, thereby, attain ways to differentiate good and bad qualitative research. We think we can do this in a way that captures all these disparate perspectives by taking a multiparadigmatic view to standards for quality qualitative research.

Our position is built on Burrell & Morgan's (1994) *Sociological paradigms and organizational analysis*. The typology is composed of radial humanist, radical structuralist, interpretive, and functionalist perspectives created by two dimensions of analysis. The subjective/objective dimension relates to the assumptions about the nature of science...whether the reality to be investigated is external to the individual (imposing itself on the individual consciousness from without) or the product of individual consciousness (a product of one's mind). The regulation/radical change dimension relates

to the assumptions about the nature of society...explanations of society which emphasize its underlying unity and cohesiveness (equilibrium) in contrast to explanations for the radical change, deep-seated structural conflict, modes of domination, and structural contradiction (change, conflict and coercion in social structures) characterizing modern society.

-Figure 1 goes here-

According to Burrell and Morgan, the four paradigms define fundamentally different perspectives for the analysis of social phenomena, generating different concepts and analytical tools, and we might add standards for good research practice. These mutually exclusive paradigms define four alternative views of the social world based upon different meta-theoretical assumptions regarding the nature of science and of society. To understand the nature of all four is to understand four different world views. We think the paradigms provide guidance for the development of four different measures of worth or standards for qualitative inquiry because we believe that there are at least four different types of qualitative research building from different types of research questions imbedded in different assumptions about what constitutes reality and how one can rigorously come to know that reality. Understanding each will make clear what types of qualitative designs are appropriate to each type of question. From there, we think that the defense and justification of qualitative research can become much more straightforward.

Understanding for theory building that can result in theory testing

The modern positivist and post-positivist perspective is characterized by a concern for providing explanations of the status quo, social order, consensus, social

integration, solidarity need satisfaction, and actuality. It tends to be realist, positivist, determinist, and nomothetic. In its overall approach it seeks to provide essentially rational explanations of social affairs. It is pragmatic, problem oriented, seeking to apply the models and methods of the natural sciences to the study of human affairs. It tends to assume that the social world is composed of relatively concrete empirical artifacts and relationships which can be identified, studied and measured through approaches derived from the natural sciences.

This is the functionalist paradigm where the use of qualitative methods is useful for theory building in the early stages of theory development. Research to uncover the nature of a problem, to develop additional variables for future testing and verification, or to explore a topic where little information exists is appropriate for qualitative methods in this paradigm. Either theory building through grounded theory studies or theory testing is possible. But the collection and analysis of word data for generalizing from a sample to a population, for discovery, for theory building, or to further develop known variables or existing theories would need to comply with the assumptions and rigor expectations of traditional, positivistic quantitative research. This means that the research design must assure as much as possible, objectivity and researcher/participant separation. It should also assure value freedom and lack of bias. Preferably the structure of the research project should allow for word data to be transformed to numbers for deductive analysis.

In the case of understanding for generalizability, the preferred designs are true experiments, quasi experiments, or cross-sectional and longitudinal studies using questionnaires or structured interviews (Creswell, 1994). The standards, then, for

excellence of a qualitative work from this paradigm would follow traditional standards of rigor for a quantitative design:

- Random assignment
- Control group(s)
- Valid and reliable data collection instruments and/or, failing this, structured interview formats
- Standardized data analysis processes with dimensions of analysis established prior to undertaking the research (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Owing to the nature of word data and how it is inductively developed and analyzed, most research projects using a qualitative design with the goal of understanding for generalization will fail to meet the expected standards of research rigor from the functionalist perspective. According to Patton (2002) these include objectivity of the inquirer, validity of the data, systematic rigor of field work procedures, triangulation, reliability of coding and patterns of analysis, correspondence of findings to reality, external validity, and strength of evidence supporting hypotheses or developing theory. These are standards to strive for, just as post modern quantitative researchers strive for objectivity. This means, though, that assertions of generalizability resulting from the research will be all but impossible. Qualitative methods will be open to criticism on many of these dimensions due to inquirer subjectivity. Thus, they have limited usefulness when the research goal is to generalize the research findings. It is much easier to achieve acceptable rigor in this paradigm enacting quantitative methods. On the other hand, research at the early stages of theory development or theory building, prior to

theory testing, can take excellent advantage of qualitative methods with the standard being the project's usefulness for moving a line of inquiry towards theory testing.

Consciousness raising and change at the system level

Research undertaken with consciousness-raising and fundamental change goals in the radical structuralist paradigm share an approach to science similar to that of the functionalist perspective, but is directed at fundamentally different ends. Here, commitment is to radical change, emancipation, and potentiality in an analysis which emphasizes structural conflict, modes of domination, contradiction, and deprivation. The approach, like the functionalists is realist, positivist, determinist, and nomothetic. Research focuses on structural relationships within a realist social world, seeking to provide explanations of the basic interrelationship within the context of total social formations. This is a critical perspective that assumes contemporary society is characterized by fundamental conflicts which generate radical change through political and economic crises. Raising consciousness about injustices is the focus of this critical approach to knowledge building.

When the change focus of the qualitative project is the group or the community, the communication, data collection, data analysis, and change-planning techniques are those of qualitative research whose goal is consciousness raising and change at the system level. Many times this type research is undertaken as a group effort, thus, skills to implement a focus group, the major method of data collection are necessary. The degree of responsibility for group leadership, data collection, and analysis on the part of the researcher will depend on the research focus and research design, so some differences in

expectations about the worth and quality of the project will exist. The following are examples of designs with larger system empowerment and change goals:

- *Critical ethnographies* use traditional ethnographic research methods but are designed to uncover the value-laden nature of judgments. This is critical group inquiry to aid emancipatory goals, raise consciousness, negate repression, and invoke calls to action (Cresswell, 1994).
- *Cooperative or collaborative inquiry* involves all participants in the inquiry as co-researchers determining the design and management of the project, drawing conclusions while also serving as co-subjects actively being researched (Reason, 1994).
- *Participatory action research* emphasizes the political aspects of knowledge production. The goal is research for instrumental interactive or critical knowledge that enlightens or awakens the "common people." Knowledge is produced through research, adult education, and sociopolitical action undertaken by empowered participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).
- *Appreciative inquiry* is reform-focused research that uses ethnographic methods to identify what works in a system in order to build on those strengths to generate realistic developmental opportunities based on a vision of the system operating at its best (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).
- *Empowerment evaluation* is a collaborative group activity. Designed to be democratic and inviting participation, the goal is the examination of issues of concern to the participant community in open forum (Fetterman, Kaftarian, &

Wandersman, 1996).

As with functionalist qualitative inquiry, there is an expectation of random assignment, control, valid and reliable data collection and standardized data analysis in order to move findings close to generalizability. In addition, in all cases, the final arbiter of quality for radical structuralist qualitative research focused on consciousness and change at the system level is whether or not participants are more sophisticated about the issue under investigation at the conclusion of the process such that change can or has occurred. At a minimum a change potential must be measurably present. Patton (2002) suggests criteria related to enhancement of consciousness about injustice, identification of the nature and sources of inequalities and injustices as well as representation of the perspective of the less powerful and the degree of collaboration between the researchers and the researched. In addition, given the interventive aspect of the various research designs with this perspective, a quality measure should also include knowing if participants feel more knowledgeable and better off, more empowered, as a result of having participated in this type of knowledge production.

Meaning making

Qualitative research conducted within the interpretive paradigm is informed by a concern to understand the world as it is, to understand the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience. This research seeks explanation within the realm of individual consciousness and subjectivity from the standpoint of the participants rather than the observer of action. Research tends to be nominalist, antipositivist, voluntarist, and ideographic. The paradigm sees the social world as an

emergent social process created by the individuals concerned. Social reality is little more than a network of assumptions and intersubjectively shared meanings. There is an orientation toward obtaining an understanding of the subjectively created social world as it is in terms of an ongoing process. From a very different standpoint than the functionalist perspective, interpretivism is also involved with issues relating to the nature of the status quo, social order, consensus, social integration and cohesion, solidarity, and actuality.

It may be here that qualitative methods are their most productive when interaction for understanding or meaning making is desired. When the goal of the research is to seek to understand a phenomenon or process, or explore or describe that which is under investigation from the point of view of the participants, then the interpretive advantage of word data is unmistakable. The researcher is expected to develop an interactive relationship with the participants in the study to accurately and reliably describe their perspectives. Because of this desired closeness, the process is expected to be informal, value-laden, and biased. There is an assumption that what should be produced to assure meaning is only that which is constructed by the participants in the process (including the researcher), reflecting their perspectives, voices, and interpretations.

Rigor from the interpretive perspective, then, becomes making the values and biases of all stakeholders in the study explicitly part of the evolving process and clarifying the contextual influences in the meaning making results. Because a personal voice is necessary for meaning, the research tends to evolve as the participants evolve in the inquiry process. The language of the process and the product of the research should

be personal, informal, and based on definitions that evolve during the study. Examples of qualitative research designs that have meaning making processes and products include:

- *Ethnographies* focus on word and observational data to study a phenomenon in its natural setting, based on the assumption that the context is essential to understanding the lived realities of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).
- *Case studies* focus on a single entity bounded by time and activity (e.g., an individual, family, program, event, process, institution) using a variety of data collection tools to collect in-depth information over a prolonged time period (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).
- *Phenomenological studies* examine lived experiences through extensive and prolonged engagement that results in detailed descriptions of the individuals being studied from the linguistic perspective and standpoint of the informants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).
- *Constructivist studies* focus on the cognitive schemas that construct the research participants' experience and action. Based on the assumptions that reality is constructed through inter subjectively achieved meaning that cannot generalize beyond the time and context of the encounter, the inquiry process is expected to lead to new interpretive frameworks or structures for all stakeholders in the inquiry process (Rodwell, 1998).

Regardless of the design, elements that assure a rigorous and systematic meaning making process that is also manageable and flexible include:

- Sample selection that is purposeful for maximum variation of perspectives

- Emergent research design based on continual review and reformulation
- Multiple data collection approaches such as observations, interviews, document analysis, and audiovisual image analysis
- Triangulation to assure accuracy of data and interpretations
- Mechanisms for reflexivity and bounded subjectivity including journaling and member checking
- Inductive data analysis, preferably using the constant comparison of data with emerging categories. This includes computer text analysis using a software package consistent with the assumptions of a research design more geared to theory building than theory testing
- Thick description of the research product including the time and context bounded nature of the study.

Because there is no expectation that findings in one context will generalize to another, findings from an effort of meaning making should always be couched in tentative language. The real test of the worth of the findings will rest with the participants in the inquiry, regardless of what outsiders say. If the participants see relevance and meaning, then the research product can be termed to have significance for the participants. From the outside or etic perspective, Patton (2002) would suggest such documented elements to create acceptable rigor: acknowledgment of subjectivity and the use of reflexivity on the part of the researcher, trustworthiness or demonstration of the quality of the research product, authenticity or demonstration of the quality of the research process. All of this, then, should produce a particularly focused praxis and

demonstrated deep understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Notice that change can be the focus of qualitative research from this perspective. This change must, however, occur at the individual level, first, prior to any opportunity for larger, structural changes. Notice also that change assumptions from this perspective are based on order, not crisis or chaos, so what change that accrues is expected to be incremental, like that which might occur in inquiry from the functionalist perspective and unlike the revolutionary change expected in radical structuralist inquiry. Finally, no matter what degree of rigor is established, with interpretive research it remains the responsibility of the outside consumers of the research product, not the inquirer, to determine if the findings can transfer to another context or timeframe.

Consciousness raising and change at the individual level

Inquiry conducted within the radical humanist paradigm shares criticality with the radical structuralist perspective and subjectivity with the interpretive perspective. Emphasizing radical change, modes of domination, emancipation, deprivation, and potentiality from a subjectivist standpoint, it rejects the concepts of structural conflict and contradiction of the radical structuralist paradigm in favor of the view of the social world that tends to be nominalist, antipositivist, voluntarist, and ideographic. The central emphasis is upon human consciousness with the position that consciousness is dominated by the ideological superstructures with which humans interact and which drive a cognitive wedge between humans and true consciousness, thus inhibiting or preventing true fulfillment. The major concern from this perspective and the focus of qualitative research is the release from the constraints which the status quo places upon human

development. Society is anti-human therefore human beings must develop ways to transcend the spiritual bonds and fetters which tie them to existing social patterns in order to realize full potential.

Research from this perspective is an interactive process where meaning is constructed so that understanding of the individual in his or her unique context is possible with the goal of changing their status quo. Discovering how the individual makes sense of life and experiences is part of qualitative work from this perspective. Represented here are tactics that are the embodiment of a mutual search for meaning including participant observation, focused interviews, and inductive data analysis. Results are thickly described with the intent to lead to empowerment through words, pictures, or the process itself in praxis at the individual level.

Clearly, for consciousness raising and change research at the individual level, the humans involved are the primary instruments for data collection and analysis. The data are mediated through a mutual communication process between the research participant and the inquirer. The product of the inquiry is descriptive. The primary element of rigor for this type of change-oriented study is if the process has sufficient mutuality, fairness and respect to result in more sophisticated meaning and understanding between the participants. The final measure of good quality is if empowerment is achieved for the individual through the research product or the research experience itself.

Several qualitative research designs can have this type of praxis focus on research for individual change:

- *Interview studies* are conversations with a purpose designed to explore a few

general topics in order to uncover the participant's meaning perspective. By allowing the participant to frame and structure the responses, the participant, not the inquirer, constructs the view of the phenomenon under investigation.

- *Narrative research* focuses on individual life stories. The researcher explores a story told by a participant and records that story using methods from literary theory, oral history, drama, and psychology to value the signs, symbols, and expression of feeling in the language of the participant (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).
- *Life histories* systematically capture the growth of a person in a cultural milieu by describing the important events and experiences in the total course of that life. It is constructed from a perspective that captures the individual's feeling and views in such a way that the individual interprets herself or himself (Josselson & Lieflich, 1995).

Found in this perspective can be the intersection of art, spirituality and science. It is here that the most criticism can be lodged from those using the rigor expectations of the functionalist perspective. It is here that whether or not "real science" can be achieved is most debatable. But it is also here that the most intimate, evocative pictures about lived experience can be produced. Patton (2002) would suggest more artistic or aesthetic standards for assessing quality research from the radical humanist perspective. These would include assessment of creativity, aesthetic quality, interpretive vitality, and degree of stimulation for change. Whatever product produced from inquiry undertaken from this perspective should show an expression of a distinct voice separate from the inquirer.

Product richness should be evocative so that the consumer of the product experiences authentic or real feelings as a result of engaging in an effort to understand the inquiry results.

Before closing the discussion of research designs constructed from the radical humanist perspective it is important to note that the three designs mentioned here in modified forms could also be used as part of qualitative research focusing on meaning making. Those interpretive designs will have no knowledge-for-change requirements regarding assessment of research quality. In the interpretive cases the rigor required will be related to the quality of the research product with no real necessity to demonstrate that consciousness and change were also part of the research process.

Conclusions

Qualitative research methods are important modes of inquiry, regardless of discipline. Because of the development and proliferation of qualitative technologies they present a confusing array of alternatives based on some common procedures for collecting and interpreting word data. All qualitative research is not based on the same ontological and epistemological assumptions and therefore cannot be expected to be held to a universal standard of rigor, quality or worth. The key to the justification of qualitative processes and products is the selection of the appropriate research design including data collection and analysis techniques able to answer a particular research question lodged within a specific paradigmatic perspective. When there is congruence between the paradigmatic perspective, the research goal and the selected process a reasonable articulation of what can and should be expected by way of accountability

standards become possible and usefulness, if not generalizability, can be asserted.

Interpretive work is not generalizable and cannot be held to that standard, but it can provide complex, context-based deep understanding. Functionalist work cannot provide deep, individualized meaning, but it can be a basis for appropriately targeted quantitative work or provide additional evidence to support causal hypotheses. Neither interpretive nor functionalist inquiry can be expected to be held to a change standard such as those found at the radical structuralist (for class or structural changes) or radical humanist (for individual, subjective changes) inquiry perspectives. Understanding the need for differential application of standards and being able to articulate both the basis of and the details for those standards will go far to establish what a particular study can be expected to produce by way of a quality process and product. Being sensitive to the philosophical base of the study, bias, and consistency of the design should allow for acceptable interpretations of the data that can produce fundable research with a differing truth value than what can be possible under traditional quantitative research standards.

It is the role of those steeped in these differential perspectives to articulate the basis of these differences in order to provide guidance to reviewers, editors, authors and funders in their efforts to apply quality standards appropriate to the authors' (and not just of those reviewing the work) research philosophy and purpose. Quality quantitative research can provide deep meaning, profound understanding, and surprising changes in complex situations. This is the worth of qualitative inquiry and it should not be diminished by being held to a standard that it cannot achieve without removing the very aspects that give it its worth.

Figure 1. Four Paradigms for the Analysis of Social Theory
(Burrell & Morgan, 1994, p. 22)

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