

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN PSYCHOLOGY **CRITERIA**

(Ian Parker 9 October 2003)

Qualitative research in psychology poses questions about the nature of 'criteria' that need to be reflexively embedded in any alternative guidelines.

Two problems with fixed 'criteria' should be noted. First, most traditional quantitative psychological research does not adhere to the criteria it desires, and in many cases it would be very difficult to insist that it does. Some of the most innovative studies in quantitative research have broken the rules of accepted scientific inquiry, and it has been through an awareness that something radically different was being undertaken and an argument for what was new that progress has been possible (Salmon, 2003). It would be reasonable to ask that quantitative research should also justify itself against the issues raised here. Secondly, criteria of any kind risks legitimating certain varieties of qualitative research and so stifling new methodological developments (Elliott et al., 1999). That is why we explicate some parameters for research and emphasise that the key question that the researcher should ask of themselves and their readers is 'by what should I be judged?'

An appeal to different distinctive criteria is one way of warranting the range of innovative ways of going about research. For students the criteria elaborated in this paper will draw attention to issues that they should consider as they formulate their research and prepare it for evaluation. For supervisors these guidelines should serve to provide enough common ground between psychologists carrying out qualitative or quantitative research, but this common ground can only be secured on the understanding that some flexibility and negotiation is needed so that both students and supervisors can formulate their own particular procedures for describing, explaining and justifying what they have done. So, the criteria for good research are *guidelines that are closed enough to guide evaluation and open enough to enable transformation of assumptions*.

These descriptions of 'criteria', then, should be read as flexible guidelines or touchstones and the point of setting them out here is as part of the process of making transparent the reasons and ways we go about doing research and the reasons and ways we judge, and ask others to judge its value. The process of making research questions and their evaluation transparent within (and beyond) the psychological community and exploring what they may mean is more important here than fixing meanings and then refusing re-interpretation. There are four key issues here that qualitative researchers in psychology do need to address.

The first is an awareness of the difference between qualitative approaches and traditional quantitative research. There are historical divisions between the two approaches, and this has led some of the discussion of supervision of undergraduate qualitative research as a marginalised speciality in some departments to focus on recommendations as to which particular methods might be easier to incorporate in teaching in the discipline (e.g., Gough et al., 2003). There is also a history of argument over the 'paradigm' that should govern psychological research (Harré, 2004), an issue covered in Box 1. Secondly, there are a range of resources qualitative researchers have drawn upon to develop alternative methods. Some of the most valuable of these resources are outside the discipline. Feminist debates about how we produce knowledge have been crucial to critical reflections on science, and have huge consequences for qualitative research (e.g., Harding and Hintikka, 1983). Qualitative research outside psychology, the best of which has been heavily influenced by

feminism, has also led to different varieties of ‘constructionist’ criteria that challenge mainstream psychology (e.g., Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

The third issue is explicit consideration of the way criteria should be understood in a particular case. There is no overall set of criteria that would work to justify a specific study, for a new research question calls for a new combination of methodological resources to explore it. And the best research entails an innovation not only with respect to the topic but also with respect to the methodology that will be appropriate to address it. The problem of how to legitimise existing research cannot be solved by constructed an iron grid that will thereby invalidate all the new things that will be developed later on (Capdevila, 2003). Fourthly, there is a requirement that the researcher gives an account of the ways in which the research relates specifically to psychology. The problem that needs to be grasped here is that psychology as a discipline has historically defined itself with reference to methodology more than by the objects or topics of research (Rose, 1985). Now we need to find a way to open up new ways of thinking about the domain of the ‘psychological’ – perhaps by refocusing on such things as ‘experience’, ‘subjectivity’ or ‘interaction’ – so that methodologies we develop follow the research question.

This paper addresses each of those four issues in detail in relation to how we might think about the ‘criteria’ for good research.

Paradigmatic framing – options and exclusions

It is necessary to rehearse again some of the ways in which assumptions that underpin quantitative research are inappropriate to qualitative studies. This is not at all to say that we are uninterested in quantitative research. In fact, the questioning of assumptions that underpin much quantitative psychology has been going on in the field of social statistics for many years (e.g., Dorling and Simpson, 1999) and some of us would like to see good quantitative research in psychology take these debates on board. There are three main issues here.

First, we see ‘objectivity’ as something that is constructed, sometimes for very good reasons. This construction of objectivity does not mean that some views of the world are not better than others, but it does mean that we cannot take a seemingly objective account for granted. The most important issue here is that with respect to psychological research, the person carrying out the research always has a certain stance toward the questions that are being explored. Hunches, intuitions, hopes and assumptions about the nature of human beings all play a role in the apparently ‘objective’ pursuit of a psychologist. This position – whether as empathic involvement or studied detachment – is a form of subjectivity (Parker, 1999). This is why qualitative researchers often prefer to work with subjectivity rather than against it (which is what we take quantitative researchers often to be doing when they say they are being objective).

Secondly, we see ‘validity’ as resting on a mistaken view that different ways of representing phenomena will necessarily be representing the same thing. It is all the more the case with psychological research that the particular standpoint we have towards other people and what expect them to be like will make every description we give as open to challenge. And even the claim that we are describing the same thing is to close down the possible alternative ways of describing experience, even leaving aside for the moment the difficult question as to whether we should simply respect the accounts that someone gives of their own experience or whether they know that

themselves (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999). This is why we often prefer to explore the various different ways of describing an issue.

Thirdly, we see ‘reliability’ as taking for granted that our objects of study remain stable over time rather than being liable to change. Some forms of research, action research, make that process of change the very topic that is focussed on, and there is an explicit attempt to make sure that things do not stay the same (Kagan and Burton, 2000). The lesson of community empowerment work and ‘prefigurative’ action research for psychology is not so much that change can occur, but that it is happening all the time. This is why good qualitative research often focus on change and trace a process rather than treating patterns of human behaviour or thinking as things that are fixed.

These perspectives on ‘objectivity’, ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’, of course, raise questions for the kind of positivist science that has been popular with psychologists because it makes it seem as if stable facts about people can be accumulated and then taken for granted for further studies by an objective researcher.

Box 1 *Where are we now with science?*

Psychologists sometimes argue that only quantitative research is properly ‘scientific’, or that qualitative research should be evaluated against the kind of criteria that have usually been employed to assess quantitative research. However, these arguments can just as well be turned around to put the quantitative researchers on the spot. In a recent article, the philosopher of science Rom Harré (2004), for example, argues that it is *qualitative* research that is scientific, and that it is only in relation to methodological debates in that strand of work that we can start to explore how quantitative research might measure up to it. The relevant elements of Harré’s argument are the following.

1. *Reflexivity* – the particular object of study for any science needs to be carefully specified. Qualitative research takes seriously a crucial aspect of the nature of its object of study, human action and experience. The human being is able to reflect on its behaviour and to engage in second-level reflection on those reflections. This is why the reflexive work of the researcher is also a crucial part of any genuine scientific study.
2. *Meaning* – the nature of the material that is studied by a science needs to be understood. Qualitative research focuses on the way in which meaningful qualities of human ‘experience’ or ‘subjectivity’ are represented to others. The accounts that people give for what they do may or may not correspond to what they actually think about those things. But the ‘discovery’ or ‘production’ of meaning is a necessary aspect of the scientific study of human psychology.
3. *Specificity* – the level of analysis and the claims that are made from work at a particular domain needs to be stated. Qualitative research often engages in intensive case studies that are not directly extrapolated to populations, or in studies of collective activity that are not directly extrapolated to individual members. The scientific task in this work is to account for specific nature and limits of the account, and for what may be learnt from it.

The old laboratory-experimental ‘paradigm’ of research in psychology was, Harré argues, ‘pre-scientific’, and the task that faces quantitative researchers now is how to

account for the reflexive capacity of human beings, the meaningful nature of the data they produce and the way that claims are made about individuals from aggregated descriptions of behaviour from particular populations. There are some possibilities of very good innovative research in this tradition that addresses itself to these issues and to the guidelines outlined in this paper.

Conceptual resources – handled with care

Some of the conceptual resources qualitative researchers have used will be appropriate for future research, but we also need to take into account the particular ways in which they may be helpful or unhelpful depending on our study. These resources do not of themselves solve problems in research. Rather, we take them seriously because of the additional fruitful questions they raise.

First, the claim to be ‘neutral’ in research is one that sustains a particular standpoint and to prevent the standpoint from being opened to question. In contrast, a qualitative researcher may address subjectivity, exploring emotional investments in the topic, focusing on the position of the researcher, and making our moral-political standpoint clear (Wilkinson, 1988). A reflexive analysis in a report can serve to help the reader understand something more about the work. This is sometimes included in the report as one of the sub-sections of the ‘analysis’ and marked as ‘reflexive analysis’ or put in the discussion as part of a reflection on the process of carrying out the research (or both). This attempt to question the ostensibly neutrality of the research can be tackled in what some might see as ‘confessional’ mode (in which there is a story about the researcher’s journey into the research and how the felt about it), but it may also be tackled by giving an account of the institutional background for the formulation and representation of what the research is about. That is, the ‘position of the researcher’ is a question of institutional reflexivity which draws attention to how this research is being carried out and in whose interests.

Secondly, qualitative research has opened up a series of questions about the participation of those who are studied, treated as mere objects by traditional psychological research. The key question here is how the different positions that are brought to bear on the research throw a new light on issues. We might ask our co-researchers (our ‘subjects’) to respond to the analysis, and this may with the aim of securing respondent validation (to confirm certain interpretations) or to encourage disagreement (and to raise alternative interpretations). These options, however morally compelling, cannot apply to all kinds of qualitative research, analysis of meaning which does not want to privilege the immediate perspective of the speaker, in most forms of discourse analysis for example, need to clarify why it would not be appropriate to add further accounts to the layers of interpretation they have constructed in their readings of the texts (Burman, 2003).

Thirdly, however tempting it is to claim that the research has provided a clearer or more superior view of what is going on, we need to hesitate a moment and explore what grounds we have for that claim. We may use a variety of different methods which help us to ‘triangulate’ our inquiry, and we may do this to show the different ways in which an issue might be understood. This may either be with the aim of arriving at a common view or to illustrate the intrinsic complexity of the issue (Tindall, 1994). If there were really a definite explanation then the assessment of research would be quite simple, and would revolve around the brutal question as to whether the researcher has got it right or wrong (in which case they pass or fail the evaluation). The ‘triangulation’ of research, however, should be used in such a way

that alternative explanations may coexist, and then the question to be addressed by the researcher is how their own particular interpretations can be justified and what the consequences would be of taking them seriously.

These questions about 'neutrality', 'confirmation' of findings and the idea that there is a 'definitive' account draw attention to the contested nature of qualitative research. What this 'quality' amounts to is a question of debate, as we note in Box 2.

Box 2 *Open questions about quality*

It is crucial to the enterprise of scientific work generally and qualitative research in particular, that the way we go about it is open to debate. We note here some questions for which there are no clear answers and much disagreement.

1. *What counts as good?* (a) It corresponds to the norms of established scientific study. (b) It will improve the lives of those who participated. (c) It is intrinsically interesting and will provoke and satisfy those who are curious about the questions posed.
2. *Who should it be for?* (a) It should be directly accessible to ordinary people outside psychology. (b) It should contribute to the accumulating body of knowledge for the use of other researchers. (c) Those who participated should gain something from it in exchange for their time.
3. *What counts as analysis?* (a) A careful redescription using some categories from a particular framework. (b) The discovery of something that can be empirically confirmed as true. (c) The emergence of a new meaning that was entirely unexpected.
4. *What is the role of theory?* (a) Mystification by those versed in jargon at the expense of those who participated. (b) A necessary antidote to the commonsense and often mistaken explanations for human behaviour. (c) The space for thinking afresh about something.

This is not a multiple-choice test (and that, of course, would be most inappropriate assessment for qualitative research). These open questions are puzzles for us and for our colleagues, and good research does also puzzle about them a bit further and position itself in relation to them.

Guidelines – the rules and the exceptions

Three over-arching criteria for good research can be identified, but we need these to be able to operate in ways which are essentially defeasible (that is, they may be reflexively employed or challenged depending on the kind of study). In each case, then, we should value each criteria *and* each exception.

First, with respect to the *grounding* of the work in existing research, this means that the work should identify existing lines of research around the issue and locate itself, *but* there may be cases when absences in the research literature are important and so the research will have to address these (e.g., Phoenix, 1994). If it were not possible to identify an absence and explore why that were so, no new objects of psychological research would ever appear.

Secondly, with respect to *coherence* in the argument of the study, this means that there should be an accumulative linear narrative which moves clearly from point to point to arrive at conclusions, *but* there may be cases where a more deliberately open fragmented narrative will be more appropriate (e.g., Curt, 1994). The standard format of a research report is a secure framework for many students, but it is itself a particular genre of writing that can turn into a constraint and inhibit innovative work.

Thirdly, with respect to the *accessibility* of presentation of conceptual background, research process and new perspectives (which may include accounts, knowledge, interpretations) is important, and we may want the work to be accessible to those outside the research community, *but* there may be times when difficult arguments make difficult reading. With respect to each of these, the study should make clear by what criteria it should be evaluated, and warrant the following or breaking of these rules. This is an issue that connects with the commonsense views of the self that circulate in psychology, views that may only be opened to study by refusing to speak those descriptions of ourselves that everyone takes for granted (Terre Blanche and Durrheim, 1999).

The questions in Box 3, which explicates the ‘parameters of criteria’, are designed to draw attention to assumptions about research that usually govern quantitative research in psychology, but these mainstream assumptions are placed ‘under erasure’. They are marked in this way precisely to remind you that any checklist always need to be challenged as such if the guidelines are to be flexible enough to leave space for innovations in research practice.

Box 3 *Explicating the parameters of criteria*

These points summarise key questions that should be considered in the process of carrying out qualitative research in psychology.

1. *Objective?* – Have you described what theoretical resources you draw upon to make your subjectivity into a useful device and how those resources impact on the research?
2. *Valid?* – Have you made clear the ways in which the account you give is of something distinctive and paradigmatically different from other things that might be categorised along with it.
3. *Reliable?* – Have you traced a process of change in your understanding and other people’s understanding of the topic and explored how views of it may continue to change?
4. *Neutral?* – Is there a reflexive analysis which steps back from the account you have given and allows the reader to see something of the institutional vantage point from which the story is told?
5. *Confirmed?* – Is there an attempt to bring research participants responses to the analysis into the study, and an attempt to clarify the ways in which they agree and disagree with what you say?

6. *Definitive?* – Is there an attempt to ‘triangulate’ views of the topic and a decision about whether this triangulation should be taken as arriving at a clearer view or an explication of what appears to different vantage points?
7. *Established?* – If you did not study and refer to an established line of research, did you discuss the reasons why this may not appear in the research literature?
8. *Coherent?* – If you did not organise your material in a coherent way, did you say why you chose a different kind of narrative to display your research and thus persuade the reader that this work is worthwhile?
9. *Accessible?* – If you did not arrive at something that could be easily accessible to someone in the discipline or outside it, did you say why your work needed to be more complex?
10. *Psychological?* - Have you made clear that the theoretical or methodological framework you have used is from within the domain of psychology, or made clear how the topic is usually understood by psychology, or examined what the implications might be for psychology of what you have done?

Psychological questions – including questioning psychology

Qualitative research is sometimes opposed by quantitatively-inclined assessors in the discipline on the grounds that it is not really psychology. This objection to qualitative research is sometimes raised alongside the argument that psychology should be a ‘science’ (a topic addressed in Box 1). This opposition by quantitative psychologists tends to reinforce an unnecessarily firm distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches, a distinction that has itself been challenged by the most innovative research in psychology over the years. We need to remember that many kinds of research in psychology have developed through interdisciplinary work which has disturbed the boundaries between the discipline of psychology and other disciplines, and research in other countries which is carried out in psychology departments often draws on a range of different theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. Broadly speaking, though, qualitative research may defend its place in the discipline on one or more of the following grounds.

First, the theory which is used or challenged in the study may be from within psychology. Here we would expect that the theories concerned are outlined and referenced so that a judgement can be made of the pertinence of the critique to the study. Second the topic being explored or reframed may usually be included within the domain of psychology. Here we would expect an outline of the relevant literature on the topic and some questions to be raised about that literature which pave the way for the particular research questions in the study. Third, that there are psychological implications of the research clearly stated at the outset. Here we may expect that the relevant issues concerning ‘psychology’, ‘experience’ or ‘subjectivity’ are outlined and the consequences of adopting one or other of these descriptive terms would be explored.

Three core principles are worth bearing in mind as we orientate ourselves toward good research in psychology that is able to encompass work that is critical of the underlying assumptions that psychologists usually make about what counts as good research. These principles, outlined by qualitative researchers in the discipline

who have helped to push the limits of what was acceptable under the old ‘laboratory-experimental’ paradigm, help set out a way of thinking about how we might supervise and evaluate student work.

The first is that of ‘apprenticeship’. This notion draws attention the way that students learn to speak the language of the particular discipline or craft they are learning, and how they set out any innovations against the background of those existing practices. We are keen to emphasise that qualitative work does not at all mean disregarding or throwing away the knowledge that has been accumulated by psychology. The question we are concerned with is how the researcher positions themselves against that knowledge. To put the point at its most extreme, and for those who really have concluded that this knowledge is useless, we still expect that the sceptic is able to weave an impression of excellence. Unthinkingly reproducing the language of the discipline regardless of the research paradigm that has been adopted is a grave error (Burman, 1998).

The second principle is that of ‘scholarship’. We encourage the student be immersed in the relevant debates so that they are able to make an argument for what they find to be valuable or unsatisfactory about them. A degree of rhetorical, sometimes polemical, skill is required in order to construct an argument which marshals evidence one and the other and to steer a course through debates in order to persuade the reader. To put this point at its most extreme, and for those who feel passionately that what psychology says is wrong, we still expect that this opponent of mainstream psychology is able to find some grounds from which they can reason with their audience. All good scientific research is driven by a passion to explore particular questions and to persuade others of a point of view (Billig, 1988).

The third principle concerns ‘innovation’. There is a corresponding danger here of ‘methodolatry’, which is that the way in which the research is designed and carried out takes precedence and the actual research question gets lost. It may indeed be the case that a particular methodology becomes the topic of the research, but even in this case there is a research question (which focuses on the way something is investigated). To put this point in the most extreme way, for those who do want to break all the rules about methodology that they have learned in the discipline, we still expect that this anarchic position is able to show that it knows very well what it is pitting itself against so that it does not let those who simply repeat the tried and tested rules of research off the hook. Those who have simply refused the rules of method without careful argument for the position they take and why are all the more likely to fall foul of ‘methodolatry’ (Reicher, 1999).

These three principles are summed up in Box 4.

Box 4 *Don’t stop there! Beyond criteria*

The best research goes beyond even these criteria to open up something new, so that the work is innovative not only with respect to the content of the study (what has been studied and what has been discovered) but also with respect to its form (how the research questions were explored and how they were interpreted). Three watchwords for opening the way to the best research are:

1. *Apprenticeship* – the ability to use existing resources and position oneself within a certain tradition of work. A good competent research report (for a lower second class grade) is one that displays an understanding of the key

issues outlined in this paper and which has thought through the specific questions that the guidelines raise.

2. *Scholarship* – showing that some underlying premises and assumptions in existing relevant studies have been grasped. A very good research report (for an upper second class grade) is one that brings that understanding to bear in order to construct an argument, perhaps polemical, against limits for something different.
3. *Innovation* – producing work that may transform the coordinates by which a problem is usually understood. An excellent research report (for a first class grade) is one that ‘discovers’ or ‘produces’ something new and which is able to reflexively embeds its account of what has happened within and against usual taken-for-granted practices in research.

Use the guidelines insofar as they help, but if necessary challenge the ground-rules that we have used to formulate them!

This paper covers the terrain over which qualitative researchers in psychology may have to travel, and their aim is not so much to be prescriptive as to clearly outline the range of issues that researchers (whether qualitative and quantitative) need to tackle. This is so when, for example, they do or do not formulate ‘hypotheses’ before they carry out their study, when they do or do not follow a series of methodological steps, or when they do or do not separate analysis from discussion in the written report. Quantitative researchers too-often follow well-established procedures without reflecting upon what they are doing and why. We should not encourage qualitative researchers make the same mistake. Qualitative research is often more difficult because it does require a higher level of reflection and accountability (to oneself, to colleagues and to others), and this is why an apparently simple issue like ‘criteria’ involves some sustained conceptual work which should then find its way into the writing of the report.

Further reading

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