Qualitative Quality: Eight "Big-Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This article presents a model for quality in qualitative research that is uniquely expansive, yet flexible, in that it makes distinctions among qualitative research's *means* (methods and practices) and its *ends*. The article first provides a contextualization and rationale for the conceptualization. Then the author presents and explores eight key markers of quality in qualitative research including (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. This eight-point conceptualization offers a useful pedagogical model and provides a common language of qualitative best practices that can be recognized as integral by a variety of audiences. While making a case for these markers of quality, the article leaves space for dialogue, imagination, growth, and improvisation.

Keywords

qualitative pedagogy, rigor, credibility, criteria, ethics, evaluation

Twenty-five years ago, Lincoln and Guba (1985) asked, "How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to (p. 290)?" Since that time, qualitative scholars have offered important insights about best practices for qualitative research (Bochner, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Richardson, 2000a; Seale, 1999; Stenbacka, 2001). Values for quality, like all social knowledge, are ever changing and situated within local contexts and current conversations. As such, it is important to regularly dialogue about what makes for good qualitative research. Here, I provide an eight-point conceptualization of qualitative quality that is unique, and perhaps provocative, because it delineates eight *universal* hallmarks for high quality qualitative methods across paradigms—and differentiates these from mean practices. I suggest that each criterion of quality can be approached via a variety of paths and crafts, the combination of which depends on the specific researcher, context, theoretical affiliation, and project.

The primary impetus for developing this conceptualization is pedagogical. As a teacher of qualitative methods, I am motivated to draw together crafts and best practices that students can use to help them practice excellent qualitative work. I want them to be able to understand what makes qualitative research good, and answer questions like the one below:

> Are these findings sufficiently authentic . . . that I [and research participants] may trust myself in acting on their implications? More to the point, would I feel sufficiently secure about these findings to construct social policy or legislation based on them? (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 205)

Certainly, the literature is brimming with criteria for qualitative goodness including concepts such as catalytic validity (Lather, 1986), empathetic validity (Dadds, 2008), crystallization (Richardson, 2000b), tacit knowledge (Altheide & Johnson, 1994), transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and so on. The proliferation of concepts for qualitative excellence undeniably illustrates the creative complexity of the qualitative methodological landscape. Our cornucopia of distinct concepts stands in marked contrast to the relative consensus in the quantitative community that good research aims for validity, reliability, generalizability, and objectivity (Winter, 2000). However, our vast array of criteria can also bewilder those new to the field, and may reflect "the difficulties that qualitative methodologists . . . have had in making their ideas stick" (Seale, 1999, p. 467).

In addition to providing a parsimonious pedagogical tool, I hope my conceptualization may aid in garnering respect for qualitative methods from power holders who know little about our work. Despite the gains of qualitative research in

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the late 20th century, a methodological conservatism has crept upon social science over the last 10 years (Denzin & Giardina, 2008), evidenced in governmental and funding agencies' preference for research that is quantitative, experimental, and statistically generalizable (Cannella & Lincoln, 2004). High ranking decision makers—in powerful governmental, funding, and institutional review board positions—are often unprepared and unable to appropriately evaluate qualitative analyses that feature ethnography, case study, and naturalistic data (Lather, 2004). A parsimonious framework for qualitative quality can help us communicate value for our work to a variety of audiences.

Finally, I want to aid in efforts that promote dialogue amongst qualitative scholars from different paradigms. If qualitative scholars want to be heard,

> We cannot afford to fight with one another. . . . We need to find new strategic and tactical ways to work with one another. . . . We must expand the size of our tent, indeed we need a bigger tent! (Denzin, 2008, p. 321)

To do so, qualitative researchers should simultaneously avoid a policy of consent to a public atmosphere that favors broad quantitative studies (Atkinson, 2004) but also strategically design ways to respond and act *within*, rather than being "worked over by" (Cheek, 2007, p. 1058) such an environment. As I will flesh out below, by distinguishing universal end goals from a complex mix of mean practices, qualitative researchers can speak, if desired, with a unified voice while simultaneously celebrating the complex differences within our community.

Although these motivations may be innocent enough, I also realize that a consequence of any delineation of criteria is political. Tools, frameworks, and criteria are not value free. By offering an answer to "what makes a qualitative research study good," I must also thoughtfully attend to the long history and controversy that swirls amongst the politics of evidence. Doing so suggests that, before proposing the conceptualization, I address the value of criteria in general as well as the value of this conceptualization, in particular.

Why Criteria and Why This Model?

Some of the leading qualitative scholars have opposed the development of permanent unvarying standards for qualitative research, suggesting that universal criteria are problematic, if not fruitless (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In an article entitled, "Criteria Against Ourselves," Bochner (2000) argues that traditional empiricist criteria are unhelpful and even "silly" (2000, p. 268) when applied to new and alternative ethnographies. He explains that, "We should never insist on reaching agreement beforehand on the criteria to which all arguments, reasoning, and conclusions must appeal" (p. 269). Similarly, in a piece entitled, "Farewell to Criteriology," Schwandt (1996) argues that scholars' preoccupation with regulative norms about what is good, better, and best have created a virtual cult around criteria.

Despite these critiques, negative evaluations of criteria often transition into and conclude with new quality standards (e.g., Bochner, 2000; Schwandt, 1996)—criteria that are often framed as more flexible and contextually situated than rigid quantitative criteria (Ellingson, 2008; Golafshani, 2003). For example, Lather (1993) plays precisely with the question of "What do you do with validity once you've met poststructuralism" (p. 674) by articulating a set of criteria specific to the postructuralist paradigm that are "open-ended and context sensitive" (p. 674).

Why would qualitative scholars develop criteria even as they critique it? Because criteria, quite simply, are useful. Rules and guidelines help us learn, practice, and perfect. Indeed, research on learning (Dreyfus, Dreyfus, & Athanasiou, 1986) demonstrates that novices and advanced beginners in any craft (whether cooking, skiing, dancing, or playing music) rely heavily on rule-based structures to learn. Guidelines provide a path to expertise. Musicians learn basic chords structures that in turn prime them for more advanced improvisation and jamming (Eisenberg, 1990). Cooks follow recipes as preparation for experimenting with novel flavor combinations. In short, guidelines and best practices regularly serve as helpful pedagogical launching pads across a variety of interpretive arts.

Criteria serve as shorthand about the core values of a certain craft. A simple structure of qualitative methodological best practices can therefore encourage dialogue with members of the scientific, experimental, and quantitative communities. A language of best practices provides the option to frame our work, if desired, as systematic and structured (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009), something that may be helpful when dialoguing with people who cling tightly to rules of their own. Such conversations may not only get qualitative research noticed and funded but may also elicit thoughtful input that can enrich and improve our work. Part of making scholarship powerful is talking in ways that are appreciated by a variety of audiences, including grant agencies, governmental officials, and media contacts—many of whom are unfamiliar with the methodology of qualitative research.

Unfortunately, the qualitative community has faced several complicating issues that challenge the development of a set of criteria we all support. Numbers-based quantitative research emanating from a positivist paradigm still dominates public understandings of what equates with scientific validity (Cheek, 2007). However, applying traditional criteria like generalizability, objectivity, and reliability to qualitative research is illegitimate; akin to "Catholic questions directed to a Methodist audience" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 202).

A number of qualitative scholars have responded by suggesting that criteria for goodness must be tied to specific theories, paradigms, or qualitative communities (Cunliffe, in press; Denzin, 2008; Ellingson, 2008; Golafshani, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Bochner (2000) suggests that, "multiplicity of goals implies multiplicity in standards of evaluation as well" (p. 268). Creswell (2007) specifically heeds this call by offering a unique set of evaluative criteria for each of five different qualitative areas—narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic research, and case study research. Among other edicts, Creswell advises *narrative* researchers to "focus on a single individual (or two or three individuals)" (p. 214). Meanwhile, he suggests that *phenomenologists* ask, "Is the transcription accurate" (p. 215), and subsequently lists a criterion for good *grounded theory* as showing "what major categories emerged" (p. 216).

Granted, area-specific criteria such as these are helpful for researchers who firmly align themselves within a specific theoretical community. However, many students (and senior scholars, for that matter) engage qualitative projects without knowing which theories will eventually situate their research. Moreover, if outsiders to qualitative research have not grasped basic features about qualitative methodology (Lather, 2004), we likely cannot expect them to aptly choose the right set of criteria depending on a project's specific theoretical affiliation.

So, is it possible to create a parsimonious set of universal criteria for qualitative quality that still attends to the complexity of the qualitative landscape? I answer with a tentative but hopeful "Yes." About now, warning bells may be ringing for readers who align themselves with the seventh moment of qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A conceptualization that identifies universal markers of quality may appear—on its face—to counter the celebration of an array of representational practices and paradigm-specific criteria for goodness. As Denzin (2008) noted, "We need to remind the resurgent postpositivists that their criterion of good work applies only to work within their paradigm, not ours" (p. 321). However, I encourage you to stay with me. This conceptualization does not return to a single standard of positivist criteria. The conceptualization emerges from my own proclivities toward interpretive, critical, and poststructural research (e.g., Tracy, 2004; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006; Tracy & Rivera, 2010; Tracy & Scott, 2006) coupled with an inductive analysis of qualitative best-practices literature—authored largely by poststructural, performative, and creative analytic practice scholars (e.g., Bochner, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Lather, 1993; Richardson, 2000a).

The conceptualization differentiates between common end goals of strong research (universal hallmarks of quality) and the variant mean methods (practices, skills, and crafts) by which these goals are reached. This conceptual discrimination of qualitative *ends* from *means* provides an expansive or "big tent" (Denzin, 2008) structure for qualitative quality while still celebrating the complex differences amongst various paradigms.

Comparing qualitative work to another artistic craft—cheesemaking—can help illustrate the value of disentangling end goals from mean practices. Chefs and food scientists agree that a pleasing texture or "mouthfeel" is a universal hallmark of high quality cheese—among other factors like appearance, flavor, and nutrition (Bourne, 2002; Gunasekaran & Ak, 2002). Cheesemakers can agree on this hallmark of quality without quibbling about the best preparation processes. Some cheeses are pressed (like cheddar), others settle under their own weight (like feta), and some others are barely processed, mixing curds and whey (like paneer; Scott, Robinson, & Wilbey, 1998). In addition, cheesemakers can agree on the criterion of mouthfeel without suggesting that one cheese texture is necessarily better than another. The "right" texture varies: brie cheese melts, blue cheese crumbles, and cheese curds squeak.

Suggesting that either the *manufacturing practice* (pressing, settling, mixing) or *final texture* (melting, crumbling, or squeaking) are the criteria for goodness—rather than mouthfeel—conflates means and ends. Despite the specific preparation method or final representation, cheesemakers can and do aim toward a universal criterion of good mouthfeel. By differentiating this standard from "preparation process" and "final texture," cheesemakers have created a universal and simple criterion that allows cheesemakers in different traditions to learn from, admire, and dialogue with each other. Likewise, I believe we can create a conceptualization in which qualitative researchers can agree on common markers of goodness without tying these markers to specific paradigmatic practices or crafts.

Eight Criteria of Quality in Qualitative Research

The heart of this essay presents eight criteria of qualitative quality, each that may be achieved through a variety of craft skills that are flexible depending on the goals of the study and preferences/skills of the researcher. As I flesh out below, and summarize in Table 1 at the close of the discussion, high quality qualitative methodological research is marked by (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. This conceptualization is designed to provide a parsimonious pedagogical tool, promote respect from power keepers who often misunderstand and misevaluate qualitative work, develop a platform from which qualitative scholars can join together in unified voice when desired, and encourage dialogue and learning amongst qualitative methodologists from various paradigms.

Table 1. Eight "Big-Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research

Criteria for quality (end goal)	Various means, practices, and methods through which to achieve
Worthy topic	The topic of the research is • Relevant • Timely • Significant • Interesting
Rich rigor	The study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex • Theoretical constructs • Data and time in the field • Sample(s) • Context(s) • Data collection and analysis processes
Sincerity	The study is characterized by • Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s) • Transparency about the methods and challenges
Credibility	The research is marked by • Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontextual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling • Triangulation or crystallization • Multivocality • Member reflections
Resonance	The research influences, affects, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through • Aesthetic, evocative representation • Naturalistic generalizations • Transferable findings
Significant contribution	The research provides a significant contribution • Conceptually/theoretically • Practically • Morally • Methodologically • Heuristically
Ethical	The research considers • Procedural ethics (such as human subjects) • Situational and culturally specific ethics • Relational ethics • Exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research)
Meaningful coherence	The study • Achieves what it purports to be about • Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals • Meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other

Worthy Topic

Good qualitative research is relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative. Worthy topics often emerge from disciplinary priorities and, therefore, are theoretically or conceptually compelling. However, worthy topics just as easily grow from timely societal or personal events. Indeed, a phronetic approach suggests contextual priorities are integral when developing a project (Tracy, 2007). Current political climates or contemporary controversies can spark research. Guba and Lincoln (1989, 2005) recommend topics that may provide "educative authenticity"—a raised level of awareness similar to Schwandt's (1996) "critical intelligence" that has strong moral overtones and the potential for moral critique. A study that is only opportunistic or convenient, without larger significance or personal meaning, is "likely to be pursued in a shallow way, with less care devoted to design and data collection" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 290).

Research that is counterintuitive, questions taken-for-granted assumptions, or challenges well-accepted ideas is often worthwhile. Studies that spend countless hours, grant monies or reader time to verify phenomena that are already well-established have some value in showing change or

stability over time. However, worthy studies are interesting and point out surprises—issues that shake readers from their common-sense assumptions and practices. This is why studies of little-known phenomena or evocative contexts are intrinsically interesting. This is also why people are taken with research that turns common sense assumptions on their head. When research merely confirms existing assumptions, people will deny its worth while acknowledging its truth. In short, audiences will think, "that's obvious" rather than the more coveted "that's interesting" (Murray, 1971)!

Rich Rigor

High-quality qualitative research is marked by a rich complexity of abundance—in contrast to quantitative research that is more likely appreciated for its precision (Winter, 2000). Descriptions and explanations that are *rich*, explains Weick (2007), are bountifully supplied, generous, and unstinting. Richness is generated through a "requisite variety" (Weick, 2007, p. 16) of theoretical constructs, data sources, contexts, and samples. Requisite variety, a concept borrowed from cybernetics, refers to the need for a tool or instrument to be *at least as* complex, flexible, and multifaceted as the phenomena being studied. In other words, "it takes a complicated sensing device to register a complicated set of events" (p. 16). Applying the concept of requisite variety to qualitative rigor suggests that a researcher with a head full of theories, and a case full of abundant data, is best prepared to see nuance and complexity. A richly rigorous qualitative scholar is also better equipped to make smart choices about samples and contexts that are appropriate or well poised to study specific issues.

In addition to its connection to richness, rigor also conveniently provides face validity—which is concerned with whether a study appears, on its face, to be reasonable and appropriate (Golafshani, 2003). Researchers should evidence their due diligence, exercising appropriate time, effort, care, and thoroughness. A large part of many methodology books are devoted to advice pertaining to rigorous qualitative method practice. These various practices serve as *the means* to achieve rigor. Questions about rigor include the following:

- Are there enough data to support significant claims?
- Did the researcher spend enough time to gather interesting and significant data?
- Is the context or sample appropriate given the goals of the study?
- Did the researcher use appropriate procedures in terms of field note style, interviewing practices, and analysis procedures?

Rigorous researchers carefully consider these questions and push themselves beyond convenience, opportunism, and the easy way out. How much data is enough? This question must be asked and answered anew with every research study. If data are new, unique, or rare, a valuable contribution could be achieved with very little data (e.g., Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2008). Decisions about how much data to collect also intersect with the level of analysis. Close line-by-line data analyses can be rigorous even when using just several lines of transcription (e.g., Martin, 1990). There is no magic amount of time in the field. The most important issue to consider is whether the data will provide for and substantiate meaningful and significant claims.

Rigor is also judged by the care and practice of data collection and analysis procedures. These may include an evaluation of the number of pages of fieldnotes, the time gap between fieldwork and development of fieldnotes, and whether researchers evidence a learned understanding of participant observation and fieldnote writing practices. In terms of interviewing, demonstrations of rigor include the number and length of interviews, the appropriateness and breadth of the interview sample given the goals of the study, the types of questions asked, the level of transcription detail, the practices taken to ensure transcript accuracy, and the resultant number of pages of interview transcripts. Rigorous data analysis may be achieved through providing the reader with an explanation about the process by which the raw data are transformed and organized into the research report. Despite the data-analysis approach, rigorous analysis is marked by transparency regarding the process of sorting, choosing, and organizing the data.

Like all components in this conceptualization—rich rigor is a *necessary but not sufficient* marker of qualitative quality. For qualitative research to be of high quality, it *must* be rigorous. However, a head full of theories and a case full of data does not automatically result in high quality work. Qualitative methodology is as much art as it is effort, piles of data, and time in the field. And just like following a recipe does not guarantee perfect presentation, or completing a vigorous training plan does not guarantee race-day success, rigor does not guarantee a brilliant final product. That being said, rigor does increase the odds for high quality, and the methodological craft skills developed through rigorous practice transcend any single research project, providing a base of qualitative fitness that may enrich future projects.

Sincerity

Sincerity as an end goal can be achieved through self-reflexivity, vulnerability, honesty, transparency, and data auditing. I use the word sincerity to relate to notions of authenticity and genuineness, but I do not mean to suggest a single (authentic, genuine) reality or truth. Sincerity means that the research is marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher's biases, goals, and foibles as well as about how these played a role in the methods, joys, and mistakes of the research.

Self-reflexivity. One of the most celebrated practices of qualitative research is self-reflexivity, considered to be honesty and authenticity with one's self, one's research, and one's audience. Richardson (2000a) names self-reflexivity as one of five primary criteria when reviewing monographs, asking the questions, "How did the author come to write this text?" and "Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view?" (p. 254). Self-reflexivity encourages writers to be frank about their strengths and shortcomings. Ethnographers should report their own voice in relation to others and explicate *how* they claim to know what they know.

Researchers can practice self-reflexivity even before stepping into the field through being introspective, assessing their own biases and motivations, and asking whether they are well-suited to examine their chosen sites or topics at this time. Gonzalez (2000) richly catalogues ethnography over four different seasons and refers to heightened personal awareness as an integral part of the "spring" season of ethnography. This period demands an intensely subjective and spiritual process, rather than a rational weighing of costs and benefits. Questions to ask include "Why am I doing this study? " "Why now? " "Am I ready for this? " If you cannot answer these questions, then perhaps now is not the right time.

Self-reflexive practice moves from early stages of research design through negotiating access and trust, data collection, analysis, and presentation. Self-reflexive researchers examine their impact on the scene and note others' reactions to them. In doing so, these researchers think about which types of knowledge are readily available, as well that which is likely to be shielded or hidden. They interrogate their own predilections or opinions and ask for feedback from participants. Their fieldnotes include self-reflexive commentary about subjective feelings and sensemaking (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The use of the first person voice (e.g., "I said," or "They reacted to me by . . .") effectively and appropriately reminds readers of the researcher's presence and influence in participating and interpreting the scene.

From this point of view, good ethnography is not limited to knowledge or information about others "out there" but expands the definition to include stories about oneself. How much of this "self-as-instrument" information to include depends on the goals of the research project. Autoethnographies (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and confessional tales (Van Maanen, 1988) focus on researchers' subjective experiences, hopes, fears, and vulnerabilities. Is there such thing as too much self-reflexivity? Denzin (1997) notes that researchers should take care not to confound self-reflexivity with "squeeze[ing] out the object of study" (p. 218). Likewise, Krizek (2003) argues that personal experiences and connection in ethnography are best used, not for personal catharsis, but to "illuminate the reader's understanding of the cultural event, place or practice" (p. 149). One way to deal with the ambiguity of "how much self-reflexivity," is to *show* rather than *tell* self-reflexivity by weaving one's reactions or reflexive considerations of self-as-instrument throughout the research report.

Transparency. In addition to being honest and vulnerable through self-reflexivity, another mean practice of sincerity is transparency. Transparency refers to honesty about the research process. Seale (1999) terms this process *auditing* and notes that researchers should provide "a methodologically self-critical account of how the research was done" (p. 468). This can be achieved in various ways depending on the report. A formal "audit trail" provides "clear documentation of all research decisions and activities" throughout the account or in the appendices (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128). Meanwhile, Altheide and Johnson (1994) advise, "the process by which the ethnography occurred must be clearly delineated, including accounts of the interactions among context, researcher, methods, setting, and actors" (p. 489).

Questions to consider in terms of transparency include how the researcher got into the context, the level of participation and immersion, fieldnote practices, and level of detail in transcription. Transparent research is marked by disclosure of the study's challenges and unexpected twists and turns and revelation of the ways research foci transformed over time. Transparency also means that credit is given where due in terms of author order and acknowledgements to participants, funding sources, research assistants, and supportive colleagues.

In short, self-reflexivity and transparency are two valuable means by which to achieve sincerity in qualitative research. Before moving on, I want to emphasize that the reason I use the term *sincerity* is because it relates to being earnest and vulnerable. Sincere researchers are approachable rather than self-important and friendly rather than snobbish. They consider not only their own needs but also those of their participants, readers, coauthors and potential audiences. Sincere researchers are empathetic, kind, self-aware, and self-deprecating. The best qualitative researchers I know are sincere and that is one reason I like them so much.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings. The need for credibility—albeit not always by that name—is noted by many qualitative scholars. As one of four criteria, Tracy (1995) explains that interpretive analyses should be "plausible and persuasive." Richardson (2000a) argues that good ethnography *expresses a reality* that *seems* true, providing "a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the 'real'" (p. 254). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that good qualitative research is dependable. In short, credible

reports are those that readers feel trustworthy enough to act on and make decisions in line with. For quantitative research, credibility is earned through reliability, replicability, consistency, and accuracy (Golafshani, 2003). However, these criteria only tangentially relate to qualitative research using a human instrument. Qualitative credibility is instead achieved through practices including thick description, triangulation or crystallization, and multivocality and partiality.

Thick description. One of the most important means for achieving credibility in qualitative research is thick description. By this, I mean in-depth illustration that explicates culturally situated meanings (Geertz, 1973) and abundant concrete detail (Bochner, 2000). Because any single behavior or interaction, when divorced from its context, could mean any number of things, thick description requires that the researcher account for the complex specificity and circumstantiality of their data (Geertz, 1973). Ethnography's level of detail should provide a complex and expansionistic depiction. In qualitative research, "things get bigger, not smaller and tighter, as we understand them" (Gonzalez, 2000, p. 629). To illustrate data's complexity, researchers are advised to *show*, meaning that they provide enough detail that readers may come to their own conclusion about the scene. This is contrasted from the author *telling* the reader what to think. Showing is rhetorically more difficult and usually requires more words than telling. As such, researchers are often called on to make tough decisions about which parts of their research reports to show rather than tell.

Immersion and concrete detail are also necessary for researchers to ascertain *tacit knowledge*, considered to be the taken for granted, "largely unarticulated, contextual understanding that is often manifested in nods, silences, humor, and naughty nuances" (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 492). Learning a culture's basic vocabulary and grammar skills is one thing, and understanding its tacit jokes and idioms is an entirely more difficult feat. Hidden assumptions and meanings guide individuals' actions whether or not participants explicitly say so. However, the significant role of tacit knowledge transcends the immediate surface of speech, texts, or discursive materials.

Accessing tacit knowledge takes significant time in the field. The longer researchers are present and closely watching, the more likely they are to notice a culture's values. Furthermore, researchers can access tacit knowledge not only by taking note of who is talking, and what they are talking about, but also who is *not* talking and what is *not* said. Indeed, good qualitative research delves beneath the surface to explore issues that are assumed, implicit, and have become part of participants' common sense. Noticing, analyzing, and unpacking this knowledge is key to understanding interaction and behavior in the scene.

Crystallization and triangulation. Triangulation and crystallization are two practices that align in craft but differ in paradigmatic motivation. Similar to how multiple pieces of data ease geographical navigation, *triangulation* in qualitative research assumes that if two or more sources of data, theoretical frameworks, types of data collected, or researchers converge on the same conclusion, then the conclusion is more credible (Denzin, 1978). Put another way, "findings may be judged valid when different and contrasting methods of data collection yield identical findings on the same research subjects; a case of replication within the same setting" (Bloor, 2001, p. 384). The concept of triangulation emerged within realist paradigms that aimed to rid research of subjective bias. The concept assumes a single reality (or point on the map) to be known.

Like notions of reliability and validity, triangulation does not lay neatly over research from interpretive, critical, or postmodern paradigms that view reality as multiple, fractured, contested, or socially constructed. Researchers from these paradigms would argue that just because data all converge on the same conclusion, this does not assure that this specified reality is correct. Rather, "all research findings are shaped by the circumstances of their production, so findings collected by different methods will differ in their form and specificity to a degree that will make their direct comparison problematic" (Bloor, 2001, p. 385). Different methods, data, or researchers often do (and perhaps should) yield different results. For example, research participants may espouse very different values in interviews than the values they enact in contextual interactions—with both sets of data being equally "true."

Despite the arguments that triangulation does not necessarily result in improved accuracy, making use of multiple researchers, data sources, methods, and theoretical lenses is still considered valuable by a host of researchers from different paradigms. Multiple types of data, researcher viewpoints, theoretical frames, and methods of analysis allow different facets of problems to be explored, increases scope, deepens understanding, and encourages consistent (re) interpretation.

A term that relates to the practice of using multiple data sources, researchers, and lenses—but is motivated by poststructural and performative assumptions—is *crystallization* (Ellingson, 2008). Richardson (2000b) proposed the crystal as a "central imaginary" that transcended the "rigid, fixed, two-dimensional" triangle (p. 934). She poetically explained that a crystal

> combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities *and* refract within

> themselves, creating different colors, patterns, and arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends upon our angle of repose. (p. 934)

Crystallization encourages researchers to gather multiple types of data and employ various methods, multiple researchers, and numerous theoretical frameworks. However, it assumes that the goal of doing so is not to provide researchers with a more valid singular truth, but to open up a more complex, in-depth, but still thoroughly partial, understanding of the issue.

Multivocality. Closely aligned with the notion of crystallization and showing rather than telling, is multivocality. Multivocal research includes multiple and varied voices in the qualitative report and analysis. Multivocality emerges, in part, from the *verstehen* practice of analyzing social action from the participants' point of view. Verstehen requires researchers to provide a thick description of actors' performances and their local significance to interpret meaning (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

In addition to providing an empathic understanding, attending to multivocality provides space for a variety of opinions. Qualitative researchers do not put words in members' mouths, but rather attend to viewpoints that diverge with those of the majority or with the author. Multivocality also suggests that authors are aware of cultural differences between themselves and participants. Differences in race, class, gender, age, or sexuality can be the basis for very different meanings in the field, and credibility is enhanced when the research evidences attention to these possibilities.

Multivocality can also be achieved through intense collaboration with participants. Participatory, autoethnographic, and feminist approaches seek out participant voices, even friendships, to form core part of the research process. Engaging friendship as a type of participant collaboration requires "radical reciprocity," a shift from "studying them to studying us" (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 735). Researchers who act as a team with participants also surrender complete editorial control in turn for more nuanced analyses with deeper meaning to members at hand.

Member reflections. In addition to just paying heed to multiple voices during the data collection phase, another path toward credibility goes a step further—by seeking input during the processes of analyzing data and producing the research report. Occasions that I call, "member reflections" allow for sharing and dialoguing with participants about the study's findings, and providing opportunities for questions, critique, feedback, affirmation, and even collaboration.

Member reflections, on one hand, may take the form of member checks, member validation, and host verification—terms that refer to methods of "taking findings back to the field and determining whether the participants recognize them as true or accurate" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 242). These practices aim toward demonstrating a correspondence between the researcher's findings and the understandings of the participants being studied. However, because the labels of member *checks*, *validation*, and *verification* suggest a single true reality, I instead offer the umbrella term *member reflections*—which may be applicable to a wider range of paradigmatic approaches.

Member reflections enhance qualitative credibility in several different ways, going far beyond the goal of ensuring that the "researcher got it right." Member reflections "yield new data which throw fresh light on the investigation and which provide a spur for deeper and richer analyses" (Bloor, 2001, p. 395). As such, member reflections are less a *test* of research findings as they are an opportunity for *collaboration* and reflexive *elaboration*.

Member reflections also help the researcher learn whether members find the research comprehendible and meaningful. Through the reflection process, participants can react, agree, or find problems with the research. Do participants take the time to read the results? Do they care? Do they find the study interesting? Enlightening? Objectionable? Answers to these questions speak volumes about the research process and its contributions.

Scholars who view the world and knowledge about it as contested and constructed should be prepared for member critique and the emergence of multiple meanings. Some participants may agree, others may not care, some may be galvanized to action, whereas others might protest. Furthermore, "members' responses to researchers' accounts are provisional and subject to change" (Bloor, 2001, p. 391). Participants may argue against findings at one point, and endorse them down the line—for any number of personal or political reasons. The researcher has very little control over participants' reactions or the ways research is eventually evaluated or used. However, they do have control in providing the space and option for member reflections, and in doing so, provide opportunities for additional data and elaboration that will enhance the credibility of the emerging analysis.

Resonance

I use the term *resonance* to refer research's ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience. Even the best written report is unable to provide direct insight into the lived experiences of others (Schutz, 1967). However, researchers can engage in practices that will promote empathy, identification, and reverberation of the research by readers who have no direct experience with the topic discussed. The potential of research to transform the emotional dispositions of people and promote greater mutual regard has been termed "empathic validity" by Dadds (2008).

Resonance can be achieved through aesthetic merit, evocative writing, and formal generalizations as well as transferability. Not every qualitative study must achieve resonance in the same way, but all high-quality qualitative reports must

have impact. Here, I describe two families of practices—*aesthetic merit* and *generalizability/transferability*. Both practices lead to resonance and they often, but not always, work hand in hand.

Aesthetic merit. A key path to resonance and impact is *aesthetic merit*, meaning that the text is presented in a beautiful, evocative, and artistic way. The way the qualitative report is written or presented is significantly intertwined with its content. And, constructing the text aesthetically affects its significance to each reader. When considering aesthetic merit, a good question to ask is "Did this affect me? " At the least, qualitative research must be presented with clarity, avoid jargon, and be comprehendible to the target audience. However, evocative writing goes even further.

Bochner (2000) looks for qualitative narratives that are vivid, engaging, and structurally complex, or, in short, a story that moves the "heart and the belly" as well as the "head" (p. 271). Likewise, Richardson (2000a) emphasizes the importance of aesthetics, saying that, writing should be creative, complex, and encourage the reader to feel, think, interpret, react, or change. Like a good song or good piece of pie, a good qualitative report is not boring. It surprises, delights, and tickles something within us.

Aesthetic presentations take seriously the importance of skills emanating from literature, creative arts, introspection, and memory-work. These include personal narrative, storytelling, evocation, emotion, and engaged embodiment (Holman Jones, 2005; Lindemann, 2010). Ellis (1991) specifically calls for the use of one's own emotional experience as a method to describe, examine, and theorize. As illustrated in Ronai's (1995) moving account of her childhood sexual abuse, researchers may achieve impact through "interactive introspection"—a method in which researchers consciously self-examine how their felt emotions affect their private and social experiences. Aesthetic representations of these experiences have impact.

Transferability and naturalistic generalizations. Resonance also emerges through a study's potential to be valuable across a variety of contexts or situations—practices that have been called generalizability or transferability. Formal quantitative understandings of generalizability are generally unhelpful and not applicable for qualitative research. This is because statistical generalizations require random representational samples using data that is isolated from any particular context or situation. In contrast, qualitative research engages in-depth studies that generally produce historically and culturally situated knowledge. As such, this knowledge can never seamlessly generalize to predict future practice.

Despite the inapplicability of statistical generalization, knowledge generated through qualitative methods can still transfer and be useful in other settings, populations, or circumstances. Indeed, good naturalistic studies have "findings [that] can be extrapolated beyond the immediate confines of the site, both theoretically and practically" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 528). Instead of relying on formal generalizations, qualitative research achieve resonance through *transferability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or *naturalistic generalization* (Stake & Trumbull, 1982)—processes that are performed by the *readers* of the research.

Transferability is achieved when readers feel as though the story of the research overlaps with their own situation and they intuitively transfer the research to their own action. For instance, someone learning about cruise ship employees' experience of emotional labor (Tracy, 2000) may apply, or transfer, these ideas to their own work situation in a restaurant, theme park, or elsewhere. Researchers may create reports that invite transferability by gathering direct testimony, providing rich description, and writing accessibly and invitationally. Transferability also relates to "evocative storytelling" (Ellis, 1995)—the production of vicarious emotional experience in the reader. Evocative stories have the power to create in readers the idea that they have experienced the same thing in another arena.

Naturalistic generalization (Stake & Trumbull, 1982) is another practice that leads to resonance. While formal generalizations assume that *knowledge* is what leads to improved practice, Stake and Trumbull argue that the feeling of personal knowing and experience is what leads to improved practice. From this point of view, good research provides readers with vicarious experience. Through the process of naturalistic generalizations, readers make choices based on their own intuitive understanding of the scene, rather than feeling as though the research report is instructing them what to do.

Finally, most qualitative researchers seek resonance not because they desire to generalize *across* cases, but rather because they aim to generalize *within* them. Within case generalization comes from taking small instances and placing them within a larger frame. For instance, when Geertz (1973) analyzed the Balinese cockfight, he took the details of the fight and then placed their meaning within the larger frame of Bentham's concept of "deep play." Furthermore, in being immersed in the details of the cockfight, readers often vicariously recognize and reflect on the role of violence in their own culture and how this violence interacts with issues of power, status, and sexuality. In this way, the research achieves resonance across various populations and contexts, even if it is based on data from a unique population during a specified moment in time.

Significant Contribution

When judging the significance of a study's contribution, researchers gauge the current climate of knowledge, practice, and politics, and ask questions such as "Does the study extend knowledge? " "Improve practice? " "Generate ongoing research? " "Liberate or empower? " The answers to these

questions point to the ways in which the research will "contribute to our understanding of social life" (Richardson, 2000a, p. 254), "bring clarity to confusion, make visible what is hidden or inappropriately ignored, and generate a sense of insight and deepened understanding" (Tracy, 1995, p. 209).

Theoretically significant research is "intellectually implicative for the scholarly community" (Tracy, 1995, p. 210), extending, building, and critiquing disciplinary knowledge. At its most basic, research may provide a theoretical contribution by examining how existing theory or concepts make sense in a new and different context. For instance, a researcher might take the concept of burnout—which emerged in research with human service workers—and see how it manifests among business professionals. However, theoretical significance usually requires that we go beyond mere (re) application of existing theory. Rather, research that builds theory extends or problematizes current theoretical assumptions. Such contributions offer new and unique understandings that emerge from the data analysis—conceptualizations that help explain social life in unique ways and may be transferred to other contexts. In doing so, the study builds on past research but provides new conceptual understandings that can be used by future researchers. The research has theoretical significance.

Heuristic significance moves people to further explore, research, or act on the research in the future. Research is heuristically significant when it develops curiosity in the reader and helps inspire new discoveries (Abbott, 2004). Heuristic research develops novel concepts that can be further questioned and explored in other settings. Researchers can increase heuristic significance by providing readers with substantive and interesting suggestions for future research. Research is also heuristic when it influences a variety of audiences, such as policy makers, research participants, or the lay public, to engage in action or change—something that overlaps with practical significance.

Practically significant research asks whether the knowledge is useful. Does it help to shed light on or helpfully frame a contemporary problem? Does it empower participants to see the world in another way? Does it provide a story that may liberate individuals from injustice? A number of concepts help round out the ways research may have practical significance: *catalytic validity* refers to research that provides a political consciousness that catalyzes cultural members to act (Lather, 1986); *tactical authenticity* refers to the ability of an inquiry to encourage researchers to train interested participants in political action (Lincoln & Guba, 2005); *phronetic research* refers to analyses that enable practical wisdom and space for transformation (Tracy, 2007).

Schwandt (1996) proposes that good qualitative research should not displace, but rather supplement and complement "lay probing" of social problems. This social inquiry as practical philosophy serves to enhance and cultivate critical intelligence that leads to the capacity to engage in moral critique (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) and training human judgment" (Schwandt, 1996). Good qualitative research captures how practitioners cope with situated problems and provides implications that may help participants develop normative principles about how to act (Tracy, 1995).

Not all qualitative scholars are enthusiastic about the propensity of research to prompt change or affect policy. Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2000) note, "[W]e hear a growing chorus of colleagues (on the Right and the Left) who presume that if one is interested in, engaged by, or drawn to policy, one's scholarship is less trustworthy, tainted by advocacy, commitments, passion, or responsibilities" (p. 124). Some scholars view practical or applied research as tainted or biased. However, all research has an "agenda"—some agendas are just more explicit than others. Furthermore, aiming for practical change is no more subjective than research that aims to build theory.

Finally, another means toward significance is through engaging research methodology in a new, creative or insightful way—*methodological significance*. A research project that yields unsurprising theoretical findings may nonetheless provide a significant contribution by introducing and explicating a new methodological approach. For instance, methodological significance could emerge from the qualitative study of a concept that has previously been examined solely quantitatively or experimentally. Alternately, one could play with new types of creative data analysis or representation practices—such as drawing analysis, the analysis of found poems, or evocation through improvisation. Or, a researcher could exhibit originality in the methods of narrative representation, data collection, coding, and organizing. In doing so, methodologically significant approaches not only may lead to theoretical insights and practical usefulness but also contribute to future researcher's practice of methodological craft skills.

Ethical

Many of the mean practices discussed above—such as self-reflexivity and multivocality, are also part and parcel of ethical research. However, ethics are not just a means, but rather constitute a universal end goal of qualitative quality itself, despite paradigm. As Miles and Huberman (1994) note,

> We must consider the rightness or wrongness of our actions as qualitative researchers in relation to the people whose lives we are studying, to our colleagues, and to those who sponsor our work. . . . Naiveté [about ethics] itself is unethical. (p. 288)

Just as multiple paths lead to credibility, resonance, and other markers of qualitative quality, a variety of practices

attend to ethics in qualitative research, including procedural, situational, relational, and exiting ethics.

Procedural ethics. Procedural—also known as categorical—ethics refer to ethical actions dictated as universally necessary by larger organizations, institutions or governing bodies. For instance, procedural ethics are encompassed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), including mandates such as do no harm, avoid deception, negotiate informed consent, and ensure privacy and confidentiality (Sales & Folkman, 2000). Procedural ethics encompasses the importance of accuracy and avoiding fabrication, fraud, omission, and contrivance. Procedural ethics also suggest that research participants have a right to know the nature and potential consequences of the research—and understand that their participation is voluntary. Such procedures not only attend to ethics but also lead to more credible data: "Weak consent usually leads to poorer data: Respondents will try to protect themselves in a mistrusted relationship, or one formed with the researcher by superiors only" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 291).

As a method of procedural ethics, researchers safeguard participants from undue exposure by securing all personal data—in a locked office or drawer, or a password-protected website. Furthermore, privacy can be achieved through conflating data in strategically creative ways. Such conflation is necessary for avoiding *deductive disclosure* which occurs when "persons who know certain facts about a participant (such as his or her zip code, profession, or ethnicity) may be able to use that information to deduce damaging or private information about that participant" from the body of data (Sales & Folkman, 2000, p. 18).

Situational ethics. Situational ethics refer to ethical practices that emerge from a reasoned consideration of a context's specific circumstances. The term, situational ethics, emerged in the 1960s from Christian theology. The approach suggests that the only universal Christian law is love—or "to love your neighbor as thyself"—and that ethical actions emerge not just from preascribed laws but through reason and context (Fletcher, 1966). A situational ethic deals with "the unpredictable, often subtle, yet ethically important moments that come up in the field" (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). These responsibilities go beyond review boards and beyond edicts like "the greater good" and "do no harm."

A situational ethic assumes that each circumstance is different and that researchers must repeatedly reflect on, critique, and question their ethical decisions. Situational ethics often revolve around the utilitarian question "Do the means justify the ends? " In other words, are the harms of the research practices outweighed by its moral goals? Certainly, there are no easy answers, but a situational ethic asks that we constantly reflect on our methods and the data worth exposing. In short, this approach suggests that ethical decisions should be based on the particularities of a scene.

Relational ethics. Relational ethics involve an ethical self-consciousness in which researchers are mindful of their character, actions, and consequences on others. Relational ethics are related to an ethic of care that "recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work" (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). Relationally ethical investigators engage in reciprocity with participants and do not co-opt others just to get a "great story."

Gonzalez (2000) argues that the researcher as human instrument should always respect others, which includes allowing participants to assist in defining the rules of the research and helping the researcher to practically understand the ramifications for violating traditional ways of doing things. She applauds the notion of interdependence between researcher and participants and advises that "indigenous participants in the culture teach the human instrument how to function as a human being in the world" (p. 643).

Similar to a relational ethic, Christians (2005) introduced the concept of feminist communitarianism as a philosophy that stresses promise keeping, relationships, caring, collaboration, intimacy, emotionality, and connectedness. Such an approach stresses the primacy of relationships, compassion, nurturance, affection, promise keeping, and intimacy—interlocking "personal autonomy with communal well-being" (p. 151). Those who follow such a model keep their promises, provide readers with a moral compass, and concern themselves with human flourishing. They do so not only in the process of engaging research but also in returning to the scene and sharing their findings.

Exiting ethics. Finally, ethical considerations continue beyond the data collection phase to how researchers leave the scene and share the results. Certainly, researchers never have full control over how their work will read, be understood, and used. However, they can consider how best to present the research so as to avoid unjust or unintended consequences.

First, researchers should not confuse voyeuristic scandalous tales with great research stories; participants' feelings of anger at being mislead or tricked almost always trump "accuracy" or "truth." Fine and her colleagues (2000) provide a valuable discussion about their "struggle with how best to represent the stories that may do more damage than good, depending on who consumes/exploits them" (p. 116). Stories about people who are poor, stigmatized, abused, or otherwise marginalized can serve to further negatively portray such people—even if that is not the intent of the author.

Qualitative researchers practice ethics when they

> come clean "at the hyphen," meaning that we interrogate in our writings who we are as we coproduce the narratives we presume to "collect," and we anticipate

> how the public and policy makers will receive, distort, and misread our data. (Fine et al., p. 127)

To do so, authors may choose to publish a "Legend of Cautions" that warns readers about the ways that the research analyses may be misread, misappropriated, or misused. Although it is rare to see such a formal legend, researchers can take care to present findings so as to ward off victim blaming and their unjust appropriation.

Meaningful Coherence

The final component of this conceptualization of qualitative quality is what I term meaningful coherence. Meaningfully coherent studies (a) achieve their stated purpose; (b) accomplish what they espouse to be about; (c) use methods and representation practices that partner well with espoused theories and paradigms; and (d) attentively interconnect literature reviewed with research foci, methods, and findings.

Before going further, I want to note a couple of things that I do not mean by the term meaningful coherence. I do not mean that a study cannot or should not be messy, disturbing, unexpected, or jarring. Indeed, research emerging from a postmodern paradigmatic framework might intentionally be written to show the inconsistencies or fragments of a scene. Furthermore, meaningful coherence does not mean that a study cannot borrow or use concepts from multiple paradigms (a key part of crystallization). Indeed, some studies are creative or groundbreaking precisely because they borrow from various theories or frameworks to create something new.

Rather, studies that are meaningfully coherent eloquently interconnect their research design, data collection, and analysis with their theoretical framework and situational goals. For instance, if the researcher espouses that knowledge is socially constructed, then it would not make sense for them to use member *checks*, in the realist sense, to ascertain the truth of the findings. Instead, to be meaningfully coherent, a social constructionist framework would employ *member reflections*—a practice that does not aim toward accuracy of a single truth, but rather provides space for additional data, reflection, and complexity. In short, the assumptions of social constructionism cohere with the practice of member reflections (better than they cohere with the practice of member checks).

Let me provide another example. Grounded theory as originally conceived by Glaser and Strauss (1967) aims toward analytic practices that will reveal an overriding story or set of themes grounded in a data set. If a researcher relied on postmodernist assumptions of a fragmented reality, then using the original conceptualization of grounded theory is not meaningfully coherent. Certainly, a postmodernist researcher may *borrow* concepts, such as the constant comparative method, from grounded theory to code data. However, to be meaningfully coherent, the researcher would attentively note the disjuncture between the two points of view and explain how he or she was intentionally weaving together the approaches.

A meaningfully coherent piece makes use of the concepts that fit their paradigm and research goals. For instance, Lather (1993) suggests that good poststructural reports are marked by (a) multiple representations of the real, (b) dissensus and heterogeneity by allowing contradictions remain unsettled, (c) multicenteredness and nonlinearity, and (d) an exploration of feminine disruptive excess. These features of poststructural research accounts are less appropriate and actually problematic for a modernist critical researcher who, for example, espouses the goal of constructing a single cultural narrative that documents the materiality of injustice.

In addition, to be meaningfully coherent, researchers should take care that their representation style matches the goals of the project. If the researcher adopts a performance studies theoretical focus, then the reader will also expect the writing to be creative and aesthetic (Fox, 2007; Lindemann, 2010). If the researcher champions a use-inspired approach, then the report should be written in simple language and clearly present practical implications—for instance in tables or bulleted points (Tracy & Rivera, 2010).

Another path toward achieving meaningful coherence is ensuring that the study hangs together well. The reviewed literature situates the findings. The findings attend to the stated research questions or foci. Finally, the conclusions and implications meaningfully interconnect with the literature and data presented. In contrast, incoherent studies may have research questions or foci that are not grounded in the literature but rather seem to come out of thin air. Or, perhaps, the findings or conclusions fail to link up with the scholarly controversies used to justify the importance of the study in the beginning of the article.

In short, meaningfully coherent studies plausibly accomplish what they espouse to be about. To catch and hold the attention of key audiences, it is important to include a clear purpose statement early on in the piece and diligently attend to that statement. By the end, the reader should feel as though the piece lived up to what was promised. And, if in doubt, it is better to promise small and deliver big. Table 1 summarizes meaningful coherence, and all eight markers of qualitative quality in this conceptualization.

Following, Playing, and Improvising

> I would like to see . . . some sense of there being a community of social researchers who have respect for the strengths of a variety of positions within that community, appreciating the need also to develop research skills taken from a number of genres . . . in much the same way as artists learn how to paint, draw, or sculpt in a number of different styles (Seale, 1999, p. 476).
>
> I want research done within all of the qualitative research paradigms to be considered legitimate. I do

> not want knowledge and how it is created to be in the hands of those who happen to hold political power. I do not want to take a giant step back to modernity. I want to mount a strong offense and a put up a stout defense to reestablish qualitative research as a valuable and respected form of inquiry (Hatch, 2006, p. 406).

In this article, I have made a case for and presented an eight-point conceptualization of qualitative quality that includes (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. These markers provide a common language of excellence for qualitative research and a useful pedagogical compass. They can help us engage in dialogue with power holders who might otherwise regard qualitative research as just a good story. Meanwhile, they may promote dialogue amongst qualitative researchers of different paradigms.

Perhaps the most controversial part of this conceptualization is the notion of universal criteria for qualitative quality. However, I believe that we need not be so tied to epistemology or ontology (or the philosophy of the world) that we cannot agree on several common end goals of good qualitative research. Qualitative methodologists range across postpositivist, critical, interpretive, and poststructural communities. In contrast, for instance, to suggestions that "researcher reflexivity" is a validity procedure "clearly positioned within the critical paradigm where individuals reflect on the social, cultural, and historical forces that shape their interpretation" (Creswell & Miller, p. 127), I would argue instead that researcher reflexivity—like many other practices for goodness—serves as an important means toward sincerity for research in a number of paradigms. Its utility need not be bound only to critical research.

Indeed, certain qualitative methodological practices that have been walled off from each other because of their paradigmatic inspiration—such as triangulation and crystallization—actually overlap in craft. A preoccupation with tying criteria to epistemology ironically supports a "foundationalist habit of thought" (Seale, 1999, p. 471) which counters antifoundationalist paradigms from which much of the best qualitative research emerges. A conceptualization for qualitative quality that transcends paradigm encourages scholars to reflect on the variety of crafts available, develop their own style, yet respect and learn from the practices of others.

Of course, understanding qualitative goodness requires more than just reading about best practices. We can best appreciate high-quality methods by embodying the methods ourselves, vicariously studying the dilemmas of others, and seeking advice along the way. Indeed, the creative brilliance of qualitative methods, like any interpretive art, is learned through practice and apprenticeship. While rules and guidelines are helpful, if it were really as straightforward as "eight simple criteria," there would be no magic, no surprises, and therefore no genius.

Furthermore, although best practices serve as goals to strive for, researchers can and will fall short, deviate, and improvise. For instance, prioritizing relational ethics and protecting a participant's privacy may require scratching an evocatively resonant story. Focusing on theoretical contributions may require less attention to contextual priorities. Revealing a story of injustice may involve risking the disclosure of an abusive participant's identity. Indeed, our human instrument will show its innate humanness by not being able to achieve everything all of the time. The key is to be truthful with ourselves and our readers.

Fine (1993) provides a courageous commentary about the "underside" of qualitative research in the *Ten Lies of Ethnography*. He discusses how researchers often try to cover up research blemishes with illusions of being more kind, friendly, honest, precise, candid, and fair than they really are. Even with a conceptualization for quality in hand, we should not kid ourselves into thinking that we actually attend to their edicts at every turn. Grasping too strongly to any list of rules—and treating them as commandments rather than human made ideas—is an act of delusion, suffering, and pain.

Good qualitative research is like a crystal, with various facets representing the aims, needs, and desires of various stakeholders including participants, the academy, society, lay public, policy makers, and last, but certainly not least, the researcher (Ellingson, 2008). Qualitative researchers will continue to face stakeholder audiences that require rationale for the goodness of our work. In demonstrating methodological excellence, we need to take care of ourselves in the process of taking care of others. The most successful researchers are willingly self-critical, viewing their own actions through the eyes of others while also maintaining resilience and energy through acute sensitivity to their own well-being. As Ellis (2007) notes, "good qualitative methodologists conduct research the way they conduct themselves in their personal lives, and, 'Seek the Good'" (p. 23)! My hope is that the conceptualization for qualitative quality presented herein can help us do just that.

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Bio

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