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Effectively Communicating Qualitative Research
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What is This?

Effectively Communicating
Qualitative Research

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This article is a guide for counseling researchers wishing to communicate the methods and results of their qualitative research to varied audiences. The authors posit that the first step in effectively communicating qualitative research is the development of strong qualitative research skills. To this end, the authors review a process model for developing such competence and emphasize the importance of research paradigm and philosophy-of-science knowledge for the competent researcher. The authors present characteristics of strong qualitative writing and highlight the concept of "thick description." The article includes a recommended structure for presenting the qualitative study and provides suggestions for targeting writing for different audiences. The authors conclude with suggestions for graduate students considering conducting qualitative dissertations.

A well-executed empirical study that meets established professional standards for manuscript preparation has the best chance of reaching publication and, therefore, stimulating future research and advancing science. Presently, the major organizational guide that psychological researchers rely on for preparing empirical manuscripts is the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, now in its fifth edition (American Psychological Association [APA], 2001). Although it offers general guidelines for all psychological research, the manual does not provide a format for meeting the specific requirements of a qualitative study.

Furthermore, although a Delphi poll (Neimeyer & Diamond, 2001) of counseling psychology program training directors on the field's future predicted that qualitative methods training would be a growing trend over this decade, recent evidence indicates that most counseling psychology programs are doing little to enhance the qualitative research and writing competence of their students and faculty. Specifically, the most recent curriculum survey of program directors (reporting a response rate of 79%) revealed that only 10% of programs require their doctoral students to take a qualitative methods research course and that, furthermore, the median percentage of qualitative doctoral dissertations completed in a given year

across programs is only 10% (Ponterotto, 2005c). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the vast majority of counseling psychology students and professionals lack the training, the experience, and therefore, the expertise to engage in and to report qualitative research competently.

Nevertheless, despite the lack of clearly delineated standards and guidelines for executing and reporting qualitative research, and despite the profession's slow progress in integrating qualitative research methods training into its curricula, there is a reported growing commitment in the field to enhance the qualitative and mixed-method competence of our students and professionals (e.g., Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, 2003; Fischer, 2006b; Haverkamp, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2005a, 2005b). This article's goals are to stimulate this commitment to enhance qualitative research competence within training programs and to fill the void in the standardization of organizing and preparing qualitative research manuscripts.

We will attempt to meet these goals by (a) articulating the competencies that we believe must be developed to conduct effective qualitative research and by (b) presenting evolving guidelines for communicating qualitative research emanating from diverse research paradigms and targeted for both traditional and nontraditional publication outlets. In presenting the guidelines, we will include a discussion of the characteristics of exemplary qualitative writing as well as provide the reader with an understanding of the concept of "thick description," which refers to the researcher's important task of integrating descriptive and interpretive commentary when presenting qualitative findings (Ponterotto, 2006; Schwandt, 2001).

PREREQUISITES TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Although it appears self-evident, we must nevertheless note that the first step in effectively communicating and publishing qualitative research is to develop qualitative research competence. Absent this competence, it is difficult to effectively communicate qualitative methods and findings because, in many qualitative inquiry approaches, the research and writing happen concurrently and iteratively. Developing such competence during one's graduate training is at present difficult in that only 10% of counseling psychology doctoral programs require even one qualitative research methods course; furthermore, few programs have research-training environments that encourage qualitative dissertation work (Ponterotto, 2005a, 2005c; Stoppard, 2002; Walsh-Bowers, 2002). Thus, at present, for most graduate students in counseling psychology, developing competence in qualitative inquiry methods literally constitutes an extracurricular activity.

Fortunately, for the student and seasoned quantitative researcher, there exist multiple published sources (and conferences) that will promote self-learning of qualitative research. This special issue of *The Counseling Psychologist* (*TCP*) on qualitative research is a good starting point, as are the recent special issues of the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (*JCP*; Haverkamp et al., 2005b) and *Canadian Psychology* (Rennie, 2002); the recent books by Camic et al. (2003), Fischer (2006b), Denzin and Lincoln (2005), and McLeod (2001); and the new international journal *Qualitative Research in Psychology* (see Giles, Gough, & Packer, 2004).

Critical to developing competence in qualitative inquiry methods are (a) an understanding of the professional development stages one goes through in developing such competence, (b) a strong foundation in philosophy of science and research paradigms undergirding methodological choices, and (c) knowledge of different research traditions that emanate from specific research paradigms. Below, we address each competency in turn.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT STAGES

Most counseling psychologists were and continue to be trained in positivist and postpositivist research traditions emanating from the natural science tradition and the hypothetico deductive empirical method (Camic et al., 2003; Haverkamp et al., 2005a; Ponterotto, 2005b). This emphasis on positivism and postpositivism is particularly the case for counseling psychologists in North America (United States and Canada), whereas in the United Kingdom, research-training environments have been more embracing of postmodern perspectives and associated qualitative approaches (Rennie, 2004). Most current qualitative and mixed-method counseling researchers in North America were also initially trained in the postpositivist paradigm and associated quantitative methods. Therefore, to become adept at qualitative methods anchored in diverse paradigms (e.g., constructivism, critical theory), these counseling psychologists underwent a methodological transformation or acculturation of sorts. Many of these researchers have published their reflections describing their transformations from quantitative researchers to qualitative and mixed-method researchers (e.g., Fassinger, 2005; Rennie, 1996; Stoppard, 2002; Stabb, 1999). Studying these reflections can inform strategies for research training.

Previously, we (Ponterotto, 2002, 2005a; Ponterotto & Grieger, 1999) posited a tentative stage model describing this research-identity transformation process. Relying on the qualitative traditions of biography (Denzin, 1989a; Smith, 1994) and life story analysis (Atkinson, 1998; Tierney, 2000), Ponterotto (2005a) extracted common themes from the published

reflections of quantitative researchers who over time adopted qualitative or mixed-method research worldviews. Below, we describe the three stages of this tentative model, which we now call *disillusionment*, *commitment*, and *mastery and advocacy*.

Disillusionment. In this first stage, quantitative researchers experience some disillusionment or frustration over the limits of quantitative designs to richly capture the subjective experiences of participants (e.g., clients' and counselors' session-to-session experiences in therapy). There is also some frustration over the nature of the research questions that anchor quantitative research in that they seem limited in scope and reach. Stage 1 researchers express curiosity in alternate research paradigms for studying psychological processes and experiences, and they start to acknowledge and understand their socialization into positivist or postpositivist research paradigms. At this time, evaluative perceptions of qualitative inquiry approaches as "less than" begin to shift to "different-from" quantitative designs. Openness to learning more about qualitative approaches, particularly those more situated within a postpositivist-leaning research paradigm, develops. Researchers at this stage, however, experience some hesitancy to fully embrace qualitative methods because such action would entail leaving one's research paradigm comfort zone.

Commitment. In Stage 2, researchers commit to learning about alternate research paradigms (e.g., constructivism, critical theory) and the associated qualitative inquiry approaches. At this point, a lengthy period (5+ years) of studying philosophy of science, research paradigms, and various qualitative approaches begins, and researchers turn to reading classic qualitative studies and established summative texts. Researchers now engage in their own qualitative research, usually within a single paradigm and research method in which comfort or competence is established. Individuals at Stage 2 may also volunteer for qualitative dissertation committees, and they may contemplate teaching a qualitative research course, as these activities will further engage them in the area and increase their competence. At this point, the individual realizes that constructivist or constructionist qualitative methods are not alterations of postpositivist paradigms but instead represent different research worldviews of *equal* legitimacy and value.

Mastery and advocacy. In the final stage of the Ponterotto (2005a) model, an in-depth understanding of philosophy of science parameters and diverse research paradigms develops. The individual becomes quite conversant in qualitative language (e.g., Schwandt, 2001) and more active in conducting and supervising qualitative research emanating from diverse

paradigms and using varied inquiry approaches. Researchers' philosophy-of-science knowledge and qualitative-methods skills are in high demand from students and faculty or professional colleagues wanting to learn more about qualitative research. Individuals at this stage become vocal and active supporters of promoting qualitative research training and production in the institution, and they may be sought after on a national level to review qualitative research submitted to journals and grant review boards.

We caution our readers that this stage model is limited and tentative and requires empirical validation. Furthermore, the model is based on psychologists who were trained within postpositivist training environments and who completed quantitative dissertations. The model may not be applicable to current students who have more multiparadigmatic exposure early in their training, nor does it capture postpositively trained psychologists, who, on their own, sought out and developed qualitative methods competence, conducted qualitative dissertations, and have primarily been associated with qualitative methods (e.g., see Morrow's [2005], p. 250, training experiences in her "Horizons of Understanding" section).

The tentative stage model of developing bimethodological competence describes a process of expanding one's research worldview. The qualitative researcher McCracken (1988) states that "learning the qualitative tradition will require the absorption of new assumptions and 'ways of seeing.' It will require new strategies of conceptualizing research problems and data" (p. 18). Others observed a similar worldview shift among graduate students studying qualitative methods (Reisetter, Yexley, Bonds, Nikels, & McHenry, 2003). Earlier, we (Ponterotto & Grieger, 1999) equated the journey of becoming qualitatively competent to the journey of becoming fully bilingual and bicultural.

For example, an American may move to a different country for 5 years. Initially, this person experiences some level of "culture shock" (Pedersen, 1994), not feeling comfortable or confident in negotiating and navigating the new environment. The person may also embrace aspects of the host culture that most resemble her or his own—for example, seeking familiar cuisine and locating other Anglophones in the new environment. Over time, however, this American expatriate not only learns the host culture's language but also begins to internalize its worldview (e.g., view on relationships, work pace and lifestyle, and time orientation) and, thus, becomes both bilingual and bicultural. With this biculturalism comes an expanded repertoire of life skills—for example, alternate methods of coping, greater cognitive flexibility, and enhanced problem-solving strategies.

We believe the process of becoming bimethodological (i.e., bicultural in paradigm knowledge and methodological skill) is conceptually similar to the scenario depicted above. For example, a traditionally trained counseling psychologist (i.e., within the postpositivist research paradigm and associated

quantitative methods) may become curious about qualitative methods, perhaps through associations with students or colleagues interested in these methods and/or through reading qualitative studies. The individual begins to delve into qualitative methods and alternate paradigms (e.g., constructivism) but feels ill at ease with the process. This is because the constructivist research worldview is so different from hers or his, and it is difficult to appreciate the "scientific rigor" of such methods. Initially, this psychologist embraces qualitative inquiry approaches with a more familiar postpositivist basis (see Tables 1 and 2), still feeling uncomfortable with more variant worldview systems.

However, after continued exposure to and study of philosophy of science, research paradigms, and qualitative methods, and after increased dialogue with researchers operating from alternate paradigms, the psychologist becomes more embracing of these alternate paradigms and begins to integrate a bicultural, or bimethodological, research worldview. Through continued study and research experience, this psychologist can now comfortably move between paradigm worlds and can conduct or supervise research within multiple paradigms. Ultimately, as we noted earlier (Ponterotto & Grieger, 1999), "The scholar with a bicultural research identity and multimethod competence can deftly attack a research problem with varying methods over sequenced studies, or . . . with varied methods in the same study" (pp. 60-61).

Foundation in philosophy of science and research paradigms. Understanding the philosophy-of-science principles that undergird different research approaches has not been an emphasis common to most research courses (Fischer, 1999; Hoshmand, 1989; Ponterotto, 2005a). McLeod (2001) observed that "it may be possible to do good quantitative research without knowing much about epistemology or the philosophy of (social) science, but good qualitative research requires an informed awareness of philosophical perspectives" (p. 203). We would like to amend this observation by arguing that both quantitative and qualitative researchers must have a firm understanding in philosophy of science and research paradigms if they are to conduct exemplary research and communicate effectively to various audiences (Ponterotto, 2005a; see also Carter 2006a, 2006b [*TCP*, special issue, parts 1 & 2]).

Reviewing in-depth, diverse research paradigms and philosophy-of-science parameters is not this article's goal and has been accomplished elsewhere (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 1994, 2005; Morrow, 2007; Morrow, Rakhsha, & Castaneda, 2001; Morrow & Smith, 2000; Ponterotto, 2005b). Therefore, for our present purposes, we simply summarize, in tabular form, the intersection between a particular paradigmatic schema (Ponterotto, 2005b) and the accepted philosophy-of-science parameters (Creswell, 1998; see Table 1).

Table 1: Intersection of Research Paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005b) and Philosophy of Science Parameters (Creswell, 1998)

	Positivism	*Postpositivism*	*Constructivist–Interpretivist*	*Critical–Ideological*
Ontology	One true reality; apprehendable	One true reality; approximal	Multiple, equally valid, and socially constructed realities	Apprehendable reality shaped by political, social, and economic factors
Epistemology	Dualistic and objective; detached researcher role	Objective (dualism is abandoned or deemed unrealistic)	Interactive researcher–participant role; potency of interaction uncovers deeper meaning and insight	Interactive and proactive researcher role seeking transformation and emancipation
Axiology	Researcher values have no place in research; must be carefully controlled	Researcher values must be kept in check so as not to bias study	Researcher value biases are inevitable and should be discussed at length and bracketed ("epoch")	Researcher values are central to the inquiry as participant empowerment is a research goal
Rhetorical structure	Third person, objective, and "scientific"; detached and unemotional prose	Third person, generally objective, and "scientific"; detached and unemotional prose	First person; relying extensively on participant voices; emotive prose	First person; relying extensively on participant voices; emotive prose
Method	Experimental conditions; careful manipulation of variables and control of confounds; only quantitative methods	Experimental and quasi-experimental; field research, chiefly quantitative methods; some qualitative methods	Naturalistic, highly interactive; uncovering embedded meaning through words and text (hermeneutical); only qualitative methods	Naturalistic, highly interactive; creating transformation (dialectic) through transactional discourse (dialogical); chiefly qualitative methods

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Understanding diverse qualitative research approaches. One of the most significant challenges for students of qualitative methods, or for seasoned quantitative researchers learning about qualitative traditions, is the potentially overwhelming array of inquiry approaches in the interdisciplinary literature. One can become so confused by the myriad qualitative traditions and methods that it may be tempting to retreat to the comfort and familiarity of the postpositivist paradigm and quantitative methods. This is an issue that those of us who teach qualitative methods must grapple with and help our students work through (see Creswell, 2007; Fine, 2007 [this issue]; Ponterotto, 2005a; Poulin, 2007 [this issue]; Stabb, 1999; Stoppard, 2002; Yeh & Inman, 2007 [this issue]). To assist the reader in navigating the myriad qualitative designs in the literature, we provide Table 2, which summarizes a select sample of the more popular inquiry approaches. We also include our perceptions of the disciplinary roots and operating paradigms of each approach (see Table 2).

COMMUNICATING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In the remainder of this article, we outline commonalities in the reporting of both qualitative and quantitative research and then move to a detailed focus on recommended characteristics of qualitative research reporting. We also highlight the importance of thick description in effectively communicating qualitative research to varied audiences, and we conclude with recommendations for structuring and organizing a qualitative manuscript.

It is important to note that both qualitative and quantitative research represent forms of empirical science (Ponterotto, 2005b). Whereas quantitative methods emanate from the natural science tradition, most qualitative methods stem from the human science tradition (see Herman, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1988). Fischer (2006a) highlights that both quantitative and qualitative "endeavors are empirical in that observable events of reports serve as data (which qualitative researchers sometimes call *text*), and interested persons can read the steps that were taken to come to the study's findings and try them out for themselves" (p. xvi).

Scientific endeavors demand certain standards for communicating empirical discoveries whether they emanate from quantitative or qualitative methods. For example, Choudhuri, Glauser, and Peregoy (2004) argue that all publishable research must include the following: clear statement of purpose, logically derived research questions, clear specification of data collection and data analysis methods, and logical conclusions drawn from the data analysis. In perhaps the most frequently cited work on guidelines for publishing qualitative work, Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie (1999) present seven "publishability guidelines shared by both qualitative and quantitative approaches." These guidelines are as follows: "explicit scientific context and

Table 2: **Sampling of Specific Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry**

Approach	Originating Discipline	Research Paradigm[a]	Sample Citations
Action project method	Counseling psychology	Constructivist–postpositivist	Young, Valach, & Domene (2005)
Action research	Political science, psychology	Critical–ideological	Fine et al. (2003)
Biography, life story	History	Constructivist–interpretivist	Atkinson (1998); Denzin (1989a)
Case study (qualitative)	Education, evaluation	Constructivist–interpretivist	Stake (1995)
Comprehensive process analysis	Clinical psychology	Constructivist–interpretivist	Elliott (1989)
Cognitive–psychoanalytic plan formulation method	Psychology (psychoanalysis)	Postpositivist	Weiss, Sampson, & Mount Zion Psychotherapy Research Group (1986)
Consensual qualitative research (CQR)	Counseling psychology	Postpositivist–constructivist	Hill et al. (2005); Hill, Thompson, & Williams (1997)
Conversation analysis	Linguistics, sociology	Postpositivist–constructivist	Silverman (2001)
Discourse analysis	Social psychology	Constructivist–interpretivist	Wood & Kroger (2000)
Ethnography	Cultural anthropology	Constructivist–interpretivist	Fetterman (1998)
Ethnomethodology	Sociology	Constructivist–interpretivist	Garfinkel (1967)
Grounded theory	Sociology	Constructivist–postpositivist	Charmaz (2000); Fassinger (2005)
Hermeneutics	History, theology	Constructivist–interpretivist	Palmer (1969)
Heuristics	Humanistic psychology	Constructivist–interpretivist	Douglass & Moustakas (1984)
Narrative research	Psychology, social work	Constructivist–interpretivist	Hoshmand (2005)
Participatory action research (PAR)	Community psychology	Critical–ideological	Kidd & Kral (2005)
Phenomenology	Philosophy, psychology	Constructivist–interpretivist	Wertz (2005)
Qualitative assimilation analysis	Humanistic psychology	Postpositivist	Honos-Webb, Stiles, & Greenberg (2003)
Symbolic interactionism	Social psychology	Constructivist–interpretivist	Blumer (1969)

a. The current authors made the paradigm classifications by judging the writing in the area (e.g., column 4) against the philosophy-of-science parameters (refer back to Table 1 as well as to Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Ponterotto, 2005b). Classifications are not always clear-cut and can be subject to some debate. For instance, see the discussion between Ponterotto (2005b) and Hill et al. (2005) on whether CQR is more postpositivist or constructivist–interpretivist.

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purpose," "appropriate methods," "respect for participants," "specification of methods," "appropriate discussion," "clarity of presentation," and "contribution to knowledge" (pp. 227-228).

Characteristics and Content of Qualitative Writing

Elliott et al. (1999) also presented seven "publishability guidelines especially pertinent to qualitative research" (pp. 228-229): owning one's perspective, situating the sample, grounding in examples, providing credibility checks, having coherence, accomplishing general versus specific research tasks, and resonating with reader.

Owning one's perspective entails authors' detailing their personal frames of reference in conducting the studies. Specifically, authors should specify their theoretical orientations and personal connections to the topic and study. Authors should note their axiology (refer back to Table 1) with regard to values, experiences, and anticipations relative to the study at hand. *Situating the sample* refers to authors' describing the research participants in sufficient detail to allow readers to get a clear picture of the salient characteristics. This may include basic demographics as well as the psychological variables that impact their participation in the study. Adequately understanding the participants, as well as the context in which they are studied, is essential in gauging the relevance of findings for other samples and contexts. (Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Arora, & Mattis, 2007 [*TCP*, special issue, part 3]).

Grounding in examples is Elliott et al.'s (1999) third guideline and refers to authors' providing illustrative examples of their analytic (including coding) procedures as well as representative findings. Authors must provide enough detail to allow readers to logically understand the process from initial coding to theme generation. Furthermore, authors should include sufficient samples of data (e.g., transcript quotes from interviews) to substantiate the organization and saturation of themes. *Providing credibility checks* encourages authors to detail their procedures for ensuring the quality, rigor, and trustworthiness of their methods and analyses (for recent recommendations in this area, see Morrow, 2005).

Having coherence represents Elliott et al.'s (1999) fifth guideline and refers to the authors' task of presenting the results in an understandable, integrative framework. For example, rather than simply listing and describing themes, the authors must demonstrate (sometimes visually or through a transcendent story line) how the themes relate to one another and how the gestalt of the findings sheds light on the phenomena under study. The guideline of *accomplishing general versus specific research tasks* instructs authors to clearly specify whether they intend a general understanding of a phenomenon or whether the goal is a more comprehensive understanding of

a specific case. If the former, the researcher bases interpretations on a sufficient number of participants and notes the limits of result generalization. If the latter, the researcher describes in sufficient detail the specific case and notes the limits of extending case descriptions or findings to other contexts.

Finally, in *resonating with readers*, authors should forge a connection with their target audiences. To achieve this goal, the writing style should be fluid and lucid, and the author should provide enough detail and evidence to convince the reader of the credibility of the study's findings and interpretations. Ideally, the reader readily appreciates the study's relevance and is, in some way, moved by it.

More recently, Morrow (2005) has identified important characteristics of qualitative research that transcend popular qualitative paradigms, namely, postpositivism, constructivism/constructionsim/interpretivism, and critical/ ideological/postmodern (refer back to Table 1). Whereas Elliott et al. (1999) focused specifically on publishability criteria and the presentation of qualitative studies, Morrow's more recent criteria focus on the broader goal of ensuring the *quality* of qualitative research. Morrow was writing from a trustworthiness-of-data perspective and specified four criteria: social validity, subjectivity and reflexivity, adequacy of data, and adequacy of interpretation.

Social validity refers to the social value or importance of the topic and of the research study to the profession and to society at large. Morrow (2005) contends that counseling psychology, which is anchored in prevention, multiculturalism, work and career, and optimal health, is ideally located to promote qualitative research that is high in social validity.

In discussing *subjectivity* and *reflexivity*, Morrow (2005) suggests that the very nature of qualitative research is subjective. She also notes that both qualitative and quantitative inquiries are subject to researcher bias and that different operating paradigms have their own ways of acknowledging and managing this potential bias (refer back to Table 1). For example, whereas a qualitative study within the postpositivist paradigm may incorporate an interrater reliability index, a constructivist paradigm may use "bracketing" (i.e., setting aside assumptions and suspending judgment on the experience or phenomena to be studied; Schwandt, 2001) followed by an ongoing "self-reflective journal" to monitor researcher reflexivity (self-reflection) throughout all phases of the study.

A third characteristic of good qualitative research across multiple paradigms is *adequacy of data.* Here, Morrow (2005) extends the work of Erickson (1986), who described five types of evidentiary adequacy. *Adequate amounts of evidence* refers to sufficient information-rich cases (e.g., interviewees) secured through purposeful and criterion-based sampling that aims to select research participants who have in-depth experience with the phenomena under study and who can effectively express these experiences.

Sampling should proceed until achieving data redundancy or saturation. *Adequate variety in kinds of evidence* refers to the importance and value of multiple data sources (e.g., individual interviews, document analysis, focus groups, participant observation) in qualitative research. *Interpretive status of evidence* refers to the complementary nature of the data sources (e.g., document analysis and interviewing) and to the importance of prolonged exposure to the data sources and to the research setting to understand the context sufficiently to make adequate interpretations. *Adequate disconfirming evidence* involves the deliberate and careful search for data that may disconfirm earlier data or previous expectations. Finally, *adequate discrepant case analysis* involves locating disconfirming instances of a phenomenon and comparing them with confirming instances to further explore the phenomenon's complexity. These final two adequacy-of-data strategies help "to combat the investigator's natural tendency to seek confirmation of her or his preliminary or emerging findings" (Morrow, 2005, p. 256).

Morrow's (2005) final paradigm-transcendent trustworthiness criterion is *adequacy of interpretation.* Adequately interpreting qualitative data necessitates deep immersion in the data (often called "intimacy with the data") and the ongoing iterative process of collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and writing up the data. During this iterative process, the researcher develops an analytic framework that helps make sense of the data—that is, how it all comes together and what it means to the reader. For example, using grounded theory, the researcher presents and describes a substantive theoretical framework both through words and a figural presentation. Finally, the written report describing and summarizing the research should properly balance investigator interpretation and supporting participant quotations.

Thick Description: The Linchpin of Qualitative Writing

Thick description is perhaps the term we use most when teaching qualitative research to seasoned quantitative researchers or to beginning-level graduate students. We consider thick description to be the linchpin in effectively reporting qualitative methodology and results and in communicating with one's audience. Thick description leads to "thick interpretation" (Denzin, 1989b), which, in turn, leads to "thick meaning" (Ponterotto, 2006).

We can trace the origins of the concept of thick description to the metaphysical philosopher Gilbert Ryle's (1949) *Concept of the Mind* in which he meticulously presents "the description of intellectual work" (p. 305). The actual term *thick description* first appears in Ryle's (1971) *Collected Papers, Volume II, Collected Essays 1929-1968*. For Ryle (1971), thick description involves understanding and absorbing the context of the situation

or behavior and, on that basis, ascribing present and future intentionality to the behavior (see Ponterotto, 2006).

The term *thick description* became part of the qualitative researcher's lexicon when the North American anthropologist Clifford Geertz borrowed it to describe the work of ethnography. Geertz (1973) emphasized that what defined the work of ethnography was not the ethnographer's specific tasks and procedures (e.g., transcribing texts and taking genealogies) but the "intellectual effort" required to interpret actions and experiences within an appropriate context of the participants' life experiences.

The noted qualitative sociologist Norman K. Denzin expanded on Geertz's (1973) adaptation of *thick description* and provided our current working definition below. We believe Denzin's conceptualization of thick description will guide counseling psychology researchers in effectively communicating the methods and results of their qualitative research.

> A thick description does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard. (Denzin, 1989b, p. 83; also quoted in Patton, 1990, p. 430)

Structure of Qualitative Writing

A major challenge in preparing qualitative research studies for publication in counseling psychology journals is the mandated structure and length of submitted manuscripts. In our constructivist qualitative work, we have found it challenging to write concise manuscripts given our desire to include representative quotes that capture the essence of participants' experiences with the phenomena under study. At times, it is also difficult to structure the manuscript in APA's (2001) recommended "Results" and subsequent "Discussion" sections. This difficulty arises because using the constant comparative method and iterative analysis in the constructivist paradigm sometimes necessitates combining the Results and Discussion sections for the sake of fluidity.

Responding to these inherent challenges in communicating qualitative research, the *Journal of Counseling and Development* has offered official "guidelines for writing a qualitative manuscript" for the journal. These guidelines, coauthored by Choudhuri et al. (2004), recommend the following four parts to the manuscript: Background, Methods, Data Analysis, and Findings. Morrow (2005) prefers the traditional sections of an APA article

with modifications within sections: Introduction, Method (including orient-ing paradigm, specific research design or approach, researcher-as-instrument statement, participants, sources of data, and data analysis), Results, and Discussion (see also Fischer, 1999).

In an attempt to integrate recent writing on preparing qualitative manu-scripts for publication with our own publishing experiences, we present an evolving outline below. Rather than being redundant with recent contribu-tions on the topic (e.g., Choudhuri et al., 2004; Fischer, 1999; Morrow, 2005), we present a general outline that integrates recommendations for the two most popular qualitative-lending research paradigms in counseling psychology research (refer back to Table 1)—constructivism and postposi-tivism (see appendixed content analysis in Ponterotto, 2005b.) Furthermore, throughout the recommended article sections, we integrate Elliott et al.'s (1999) publishability guidelines and Morrow's (2005) trustworthiness crite-ria. In fact, we recommend that the Elliott et al. and Morrow contributions be read concurrently with the present article.

To address the general issues of length, we embed recommended page lengths for each section, leading to a manuscript of 35 to 45 double-spaced pages. Although some scholars advocate for longer qualitative articles, the realities of costly page space in journals, coupled with editors' desire to publish diverse authors, will promote writing parsimonious manuscripts of moderate length.

Title (1 page). The title should be concise and accurately capture the study's focus. For postpositivist studies, the title should be "content oriented" (Fischer, 1999, p. 108) and scholarly. For constructivist studies, it is appro-priate to embed in the title the participants' everyday language. Thus, partic-ipant voices (a particular phrase or poignant catchword) are "honored" at the article inset. The title of Osvaldsson's (2004, p. 239) recent ethnomethodol-ogy and discourse analysis study of youth in institutions is an example: "'I Don't Have No Damn Cultures': Doing 'Normality' in a 'Deviant' Setting."

Abstract (1 page). The length of the abstract should adhere to the spe-cific journal guidelines (usually in the 100-word range), and the content should concisely summarize the study's purpose, methods, and findings. Authors should note the operating paradigm and specific inquiry method(s) (refer back to Tables 1 and 2), highlight the sample briefly, and summarize the analytic method, results, and implications.

Introduction (6 to 7 pages). The Introduction should be concise, and a strong and convincing rationale for the study should be presented (see help-ful guidelines in Fischer, 1999). The research questions should be logically

derived and clearly stated. The *social validity* (Morrow, 2005) of the study should be clear, and the authors' writing and logic should *resonate with readers* (Elliott et al., 1999).

In a postpositivist design (verification and explanatory driven), authors should embed research questions in a clear conceptual or theoretical model. They should also present a thorough and integrated critique of the quantitative and qualitative literature, which helps shape their particular research questions. In a constructivist design (discovery driven), research questions may emanate from the literature, from a conceptual model in part, or from anecdotal and case study evidence; therefore, an exhaustive literature review is usually unnecessary. Although the extent and thoroughness of the literature review will depend in part on the paradigm method, we believe all researchers should demonstrate adequate knowledge of extant theory and research regardless of paradigm choice. The key point here is that in the postpositivist paradigm, theory and previous research guide and direct the research, whereas in the constructivist paradigm, extant research should inform the research without limiting the discovery process (see excellent discussions in Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Morrow, 2005).

Method (6 to 7 pages). The Method section should be characterized by thick description (Denzin, 1989b). Authors should specify and clearly reference the operating paradigm and inquiry approach. Precise citations are needed here because variants of qualitative approaches have evolved. For example, if a research team is incorporating the grounded-theory approach, authors should specify whether they are following Glaser and Strauss's (1965, 1967) original formulation of grounded theory, Strauss and Corbin's (1990) modifications, or another adaptation of this approach (e.g., Charmaz, 2000; Fassinger, 2005; Rennie, 2000).

In this section, authors should describe researcher positionality, researcher as instrument, researcher subjectivity and reflexivity, and adequacy of data (Morrow, 2005). Here, authors address Elliott et al.'s (1999) owning one's perspective, situating the sample, and providing credibility checks. Authors thickly describe participant characteristics, sampling procedures including redundancy and saturation evidence, analytic methods, study context, and all procedures to effectively situate the reader for understanding and evaluating subsequent results and interpretations. Authors review procedures for trustworthiness and quality control (see Morrow, 2005, particularly). They describe ethical treatment of human participants and note particular ethical challenges (cf. Haverkamp, 2005).

Thick description should characterize the study regardless of whether it is postpositivist or constructivist in paradigm. Postpositivist designs may focus more on managing researcher subjectivity and highlighting data analysis

consensus procedures, while constructivist designs may focus more on discussing researcher as instrument and on noting the study's impact on the researcher throughout (e.g., through an ongoing self-reflective journal).

Results (9 to 11 pages). In this section, the authors thickly describe the findings of the study. Given the thick description of the previous Method section, the reader should be able to follow this section smoothly. For example, the logic of theme formation and connection is clear. For constructivist paradigms, authors present poignant, representative quotes supporting theme identification and description. The reader should be able to easily grasp how selected participant quotes support and represent identified themes. The overarching story line or grounded theory, for example, is clearly and logically articulated, and it resonates with the reader, who views the results as credible. Thick description allows readers to assess the "intersubjective" nature of the findings—that is, to ascertain whether they would come to the same conclusions and interpretations of the data (Fischer, 1999, p. 109). In this section, authors address portions of Morrow's (2005) adequacy-of-data and adequacy-of-interpretation criteria. In addition, authors address Elliott et al.'s (1999) grounding in examples, having coherence, and accomplishing general versus specific research tasks.

The thick description of methods and results now leads to thick interpretation (Denzin, 1989b, p. 83). The researcher's analytical skills come to the fore, as a wealth of data is brought together in a meaningful, integrated whole. Now, the reader more clearly understands the phenomenon or experience under study and judges the interpreted findings as having thick meaning.

As with the Method section, we recommend that the Results section within both the postpositivist and the constructivist paradigms be characterized by thick description. Postpositivist designs, given their ontological (one approximal reality) and epistemological foundations (objective; see Table 1) will tend to focus on testing and "confirming" theory or previous findings reviewed in the Introduction section. By contrast, constructivist designs espouse a relativist ontology (multiple, equally valid realities) and hermeneutic epistemology (meaning is hidden below the surface and is brought to the fore through intensive interaction between researcher and participant who co-construct and record the participant's experience of the phenomena) and, therefore, thick interpretation and "discovery" are expected.

Discussion (5 to 6 pages). In the Discussion section, authors further summarize and integrate the inquiry results. Authors should provide for their readers a meaningful integration of the findings while "embedding" the results within the broader field and linking the study to the overall context of inquiry in counseling psychology. Authors should highlight limitations of the study,

including those related to adequacy of data and interpretation (see Morrow, 2005) and should note particular procedural and ethical challenges (see Haverkamp, 2005). Depending on the journal focus, authors may present ideas for future qualitative and quantitative research and/or note clinical implications.

In postpositivist designs, authors highlight the implications of the findings for the theory and/or previous research reviewed in the Introduction. In constructivist designs, which may not have thoroughly reviewed the literature and theory in the Introduction (for fear of limiting discovery; see Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Haverkamp & Young, 2007), authors should now fully integrate previous research and should note the implications of the results in light of this previous research and existing theory.

References (3 pages). We recommend judicious use of citation support; overly citing unnecessary or tangential references can interrupt the manuscript's flow and negatively impact Elliott et al.'s (1999) guideline of resonating with readers. Postpositivist and constructivist designs should be similar with regard to the thoroughness and recency of the literature review.

Tables and figures (2 pages). We strongly recommend using tables and figures to visually represent the study's main results (and possible sample characteristics). Well-constructed tables and figures enhance thick description and help the reader integrate the findings and resonate with the study's implications. In postpositivist designs, researchers often present tables (highlighting common and less common themes) or figures linearly with boxes or circles and connecting arrows of influence or relationship directionality. In addition to these graphics, constructivist designs may also incorporate figures that capture in a creative or metaphorical way the "deep meaning" of the results and interpretations. For example, a large tree may constitute the figure, where the roots, trunk, branches, and leaves represent interconnecting aspects of the phenomena under study.

Appendices (2 pages). Appendices can be helpful and add to the thick-description characteristic of strong qualitative research. For example, including in a constructivist study the evolving interview protocol from participant to participant demonstrates an important aspect of theoretical sampling and highlights the discovery nature of the interview process. In a postpositivist study, one can include the semistructured interview protocol as well; in this case, the researcher uses the same protocol with every participant. A sample of the researcher's self-reflective journal or analytic memos (see Morrow, 2005) would also be of value to the reader. Appendices can be lengthy, and researchers need to use discretion as to whether including appendices significantly enhances readers' resonance with the study.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR READER:
WRITING FOR DIFFERENT AUDIENCES

As Morrow (2007) forcefully highlighted in the lead article to this special *TCP* issue, it is essential that counseling researchers understand the philosophy-of-science parameters and paradigm base underlying their research programs. Earlier, Morrow (2005) had outlined quality and rigor, or trustworthiness, guidelines specific to leading paradigms. In the preceding section of this article, we expanded on Morrow's conceptual and methodological positions by emphasizing that the presentation or communication of research results needs to be contextualized paradigmatically. In this final section, we turn to further recommendations on writing qualitative research for various target audiences. We discuss writing for traditional (i.e., postpositivist oriented) and nontraditional (i.e., constructivist or multiparadigmatic) journals, books, and dissertation committees.

Targeting Professional Journals

As the paradigm shift from a primarily postpositivist research emphasis to a more balanced multiparadigmatic (i.e., postpositivism, constructivism/interpretivism, critical theory) emphasis in applied and counseling psychology continues (Haverkamp et al., 2005b; O'Neill, 2002; Ponterotto, 2005a), more graduate students as well as seasoned scholars will be conducting and submitting for review qualitative dissertations and studies. Journal outlets, given their international Internet access and academic prestige, will remain a first choice for researchers hoping to publish qualitative studies. As with most psychology journals, counseling psychology journals were initiated within a postpositivist context. Slowly, these journals have increased their receptivity to qualitative submissions. For example, a 15-year methodological content analysis of *JCP* (Ponterotto, 2005b) documented that during Lenore Harmon's editorial term, only 0.6% of studies published were qualitative; by contrast, the percentages of qualitative studies published under the two subsequent editors, Clara Hill and Jo-Ida Hansen, increased to 7.6% and 6.9%, respectively.

This documented increased interest in and receptivity to qualitative studies in *JCP* notwithstanding, the majority of editorial board members for both *JCP* and *TCP* were trained within the postpositivist paradigm. Generally speaking, we have found editorial board members of APA journals to be more receptive to postpositivist-oriented qualitative research (refer back to Tables 1 and 2), such as Hill, Thompson, and Williams's (1997) Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; note that Hill et al.'s [2005], CQR explication has taken on more constructivist characteristics; see commentary on this in

Hill et al., 2005; Ponterotto, 2005b) and Strauss and Corbin's (1990) adaptation of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original grounded theory.

If counseling psychology researchers wish to submit a more constructivist or critical-theory-oriented research study to traditional journals, we recommend that they focus on helping readers (and manuscript reviewers) understand the paradigm and method chosen (see Fischer, 1999). For example, Rennie (1996) has discussed the challenges his research teams have faced in submitting work to traditional journals (such as *JCP*). More specifically, he notes that these journals require extensive methodological detail at the expense of shortening the Results and Discussion sections. By way of contrast, in nontraditional journals (e.g., primarily qualitative journals or some European-based journals), Rennie's teams were able to keep the Method section brief because reviewers already understood the operating paradigm (in this case, constructivism) and inquiry approach (in this case, grounded theory) and did not need to be educated about them. Therefore, Rennie's teams were able to present longer Results sections (with rich, descriptive quotes) and Discussion sections.

Some of our own doctoral-student-led qualitative research teams' experiences support Rennie's (1996) reflections. We have found that publishing phenomenology (e.g., Kerwin, Ponterotto, Harris, & Jackson, 1993) and grounded-theory studies (e.g., Timlin-Scalera, Ponterotto, Jackson, & Blumberg, 2003) in *JCP* necessitated educating reviewers about the paradigm choice and inquiry approach, which led to longer Method sections and reduced Results and Discussion sections. On the other hand, publishing phenomenology (e.g., Woodring, Cancelli, Ponterotto, & Keitel, 2005) and grounded-theory studies (e.g., Sciarra & Ponterotto, 1998) in noncounseling journals—in this case, the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* and *Qualitative Health Research*— allowed shorter methodological descriptions and longer Results and Discussion sections.

It is our view and experience that the majority of manuscript reviewers and action editors who are assigned qualitative submissions to review for *JCP* and *TCP* (and APA journals, generally) are in Stages 1 (disillusionment) and 2 (commitment) of our qualitative competency model (presented earlier). We urge, in this writing, that editors of *JCP*, *TCP*, and other historically postpositivist-oriented journals actively seek board members in Stage 3 (mastery and advocacy) of our three-stage model. This will necessitate active recruitment of the minority of counseling psychologists who have Stage 3 expertise, as well as recruiting reviewers in other disciplines who have such expertise (see Ponterotto, 2005a, for specific recruitment strategies). For example, some of the most helpful reviews we have received on qualitative submissions have come from scholars in sociology, education, and

nursing. In one case, our *JCP* action editor called on a sociologist for an ad hoc review (see Timlin-Scalera et al., 2003).

Targeting Books

Publishing qualitative studies as books is more common in sociology and anthropology than in psychology. For example, classic book-produced ethnographic studies that are required reading in our qualitative-methods course include *The Urban Villagers* (Gans, 1962), *Street Corner Society* (Whyte, 1943), *Tally's Corner* (Liebow, 1967), *Boys in White* (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961), and *Awareness of Dying* (Glaser & Strauss, 1965; the origins of grounded theory). Getting a qualitative study in psychology published as a book is currently difficult because publishers use a cost–profit financial analysis before issuing contracts. Qualitative studies in psychology are usually too focused to appeal to broad audiences, and therefore, publishers are reluctant to offer contracts for such proposals.

However, publishing qualitative studies (including dissertation spin-offs) is more likely in edited books that have a broad focus and that may be targeted as class textbooks. Two good examples are Kopala and Suzuki's (1999) *Using Qualitative Methods in Psychology* (Parts III and IV) and Fischer's (2006b) new collection on *Qualitative Research Methods for Psychologists: Introduction Through Empirical Studies*.

FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS ONLY!
Should I Conduct a Qualitative Dissertation?

Although this subheading is tongue in cheek, the underlying question is important for graduate students in counseling psychology. Clearly, as the paradigm shift from a primarily postpositivist research training environment slowly shifts to a more balanced multiparadigmatic (e.g., postpositivism and constructivism) research training environment, and as training programs begin to offer more qualitative research courses, students will need to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of conducting qualitative dissertation studies. The reality of the current research environment in counseling psychology is as follows: Across training programs in the United States (and to some extent, Canada), the mean percentage of completed, qualitative doctoral dissertations is 15%, and this figure is negatively skewed because of a few particularly qualitative-friendly programs. The median percentage of completed qualitative dissertations averaged across programs is only 10% (see Ponterotto, 2005c). Thus, in the majority of training programs, there is clearly a preference among faculty for quantitative dissertations.

Students need to consider the potential challenges if they pursue qualitative studies. In the few programs known to provide exemplary qualitative research training (e.g., University of Maryland at College Park, University of Utah, and Fordham University in the United States; and the University of British Columbia and York University in Canada; see top-ranked programs in Ponterotto, 2005c), students benefit from an encouraging qualitative research environment as well as established research mentors with whom to work. However, for the majority of graduate students reading this *TCP* special issue, it is more likely that their programs may have only one or two qualitatively oriented faculty who are likely to be at junior or mid-career levels (see Ponterotto, 2005a) working in a postpositivist and quantitative research environment. Therefore, students need to ask themselves the following questions: (a) Will my qualitative research be encouraged and valued? (b) Who will be excited about mentoring my dissertation study, and who can serve on the committee as readers? (c) Is there any tension in the department around students conducting qualitative research?

Our suggestions to graduate students on this potential dilemma follow.

Suggestion 1. Become competent and well-read in multiple research paradigms and inquiry approaches. Ponterotto (2005a) outlines leading qualitative books organized by focus (general or approach specific) and level (beginning or advanced) and important journals that should be familiar to any student hoping to defend a qualitative dissertation proposal or final document. Of particular importance is understanding philosophy-of-science parameters and research-paradigm characteristics (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Morrow, 2005, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005b). It is essential that doctoral students be able to discuss different research paradigms, note how their selected qualitative inquiry approach emanates from a particular paradigm or combination of paradigms, and explain differences between paradigms to faculty advisors.

Suggestion 2. Take multiple qualitative research courses within your department (if available) and outside your department. The Ponterotto (2005c) survey found that even though only 10% of programs required a qualitative course, almost all indicated that there were options to take qualitative courses as electives, both within and outside the department. Students will find it very interesting and valuable to supplement a qualitative research course in psychology with a parallel course in another discipline. We have found that being a strong and influential qualitative scholar entails both real-life research experience "in the trenches" as well as extensive reading of literature beyond one's discipline, for example, in education, sociology, anthropology, communications, history, social work, nursing, philosophy, and feminist and race studies (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Suggestion 3. Seek out advisement or mentorship in your qualitative skill development. These advisors or mentors can be faculty or advanced doctoral students in your department or in a neighboring department or discipline at your home institution. Another option is to seek guidance and mentoring from qualitative scholars at other institutions, though this may be more challenging both logistically and politically, depending on your program faculty's position on such an arrangement. We have consulted with doctoral students at various institutions and found the advising relationship mutually rewarding though time-consuming. A good place to network with possible qualitative advisors outside your institution is at various counseling, education, psychology, and sociology conferences.

Suggestion 4. Conduct a qualitative pilot study prior to submitting a qualitative dissertation proposal. It is important to convince faculty that you have the competence to conduct qualitative research. The less multiparadigmatic and qualitative competence a program faculty has, the more you will need convince them you know what you are doing vis-à-vis alternate research paradigms and inquiry approaches. In short, you may need to develop some qualitative research expertise and effectively communicate this expertise to program faculty before they will encourage you to pursue a qualitative dissertation. Conducting an interview-based pilot study, for example, will give you in-the-trenches experience with qualitative work and will familiarize you with the extensive time commitment and cost involved in transcribing what may be hundreds of pages of interviews.

Suggestion 5. Another option in weighing the decision to conduct a qualitative dissertation is to consider potential faculty mentors' and readers' preferred operating paradigms (Table 1) and research approaches (Table 2). You can gather this information by reading their most recent qualitative publications, taking their courses, and dialoging with them. If the qualitative-embracing faculty are postpositivist leaning, then consider research approaches more consistent with postpositivism or that incorporate postpositivist components (e.g., Hill et al.'s [1997], CQR approach or Strauss and Corbin's [1990], adaptation of grounded theory; see Ponterotto, 2005b, for how to locate a particular inquiry approach within a specific paradigm or combination of paradigms). If one or more potential dissertation committee members are more constructivist or critical theory oriented in paradigm, then it may be appropriate to pursue an approach within this genre of methods—for example, Glaser and Strauss's (1967) or Rennie's (2000) versions of grounded theory, phenomenology, participatory action research, biography or life history analysis, and so forth (refer back to Table 2).

Suggestion 6. One may be tempted to conduct a multimethod or mixed-method dissertation study—it sounds more exotic. However, we generally caution against mixed-method designs unless you have already conducted publishable-quality work in both approaches separately (see Ponterotto & Grieger, 1999). For state-of-the-art reviews of mixed-method designs, see Hanson, Creswell, Clark, Petska, and Creswell (2005) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003).

CONCLUSION

We believe that the key to effectively communicating qualitative research to varied audiences is developing competence and research experience across multiple paradigms. This competence leads to qualitative writing characterized by thick description of researcher reflexivity and positionality, thick description of methods and procedures, and thick description of analytic decisions and results, all of which lead to thick interpretation of the results and thick meaning of the findings that resonate with readers as well as with the research participants and the investigators themselves (Ponterotto, 2006).

We would like to end this article with some personal reflections. Like many counseling psychologists, we were trained within a postpositivist research training environment and conducted quantitative dissertations. Beginning in the early 1990s, we were influenced by graduate students seeking to engage in constructivist qualitative research focusing on issues of multicultural counseling. Empowered by these students' level of commitment and passion toward qualitative research, we began the humbling experience of educating ourselves in philosophy of science and diverse research paradigms. Our lives and careers have been enhanced by our development as multimethod researchers, and we believe that our work as teachers, researchers, and clinicians has grown stronger. We are personally committed to helping the field of counseling psychology become more multiparadigmatic in scientific identity. In closing, we hope that this article and this *TCP* special issue will contribute in a small way to the paradigm shift currently under way in counseling research training.

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