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## Qualitative Research: the “good,” the “bad,” the “ugly”

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**Abstract:** This article explores what constitutes “Good,” “Bad,” and “Ugly” qualitative research towards more fully appreciating of the nature and vision of its project. In the first two sections, I define qualitative research and map variants. Then, after highlighting qualitative evaluation criteria, I explore key issues and themes of what seems to make research “Good,” “Bad,” or “Ugly”. In the latter half of the paper, I focus specifically on four broad types of qualitative research (literature review, phenomenology, narrative-ethnographic research and discourse analysis), critically discussing a good exemplar of each. To make my strategic selections more transparent and show my role in the construction of this paper, reflexive passages are offered. Here, I engage versions of personal/introspective and methodological/contextual reflexivity plus utilise some embodied and ethical reflexivity.

**Keywords:** Qualitative research; evaluation criteria; rigour; methodological integrity; reflexivity

*“If it has no science, it fails. If it has no craft, it bores. And if it has no art, it offends.” Sheri Tepper (1988, p. 199)*

Following interest resulting from my previous article on thematic analysis with a similarly playful title (Finlay, 2021), I decided that another was needed which identified the “Good,” “Bad,” and the “Ugly” within qualitative research more generally. All too often in my capacity as Editor, I’ve come across authors and reviewers who state that the problem with qualitative research is that it is too “subjective” or “cannot be generalized.” Such statements show a lack of appreciation of

the nature and vision of qualitative research. They seem to be regretful backward glances to scientifically propelled evaluative criteria related to quantitative research. What gets missed is the celebration of the special strengths and unique potential of qualitative research.

In the first two sections of this paper, I define qualitative research and map variants. Then, after highlighting qualitative evaluation criteria, I riff around the themes of what constitutes “Good,” “Bad,” and “Ugly” versions. In the latter half of the paper, I focus specifically on four broad types of qualitative research (literature review, phenomenology, narrative-ethnographic research, and discourse analysis), critically discussing a good exemplar of each. To make my strategic

selections more transparent (and show my role in the construction of this paper) indented, italicized reflexive passages are offered. In these various passages I largely engage versions of personal/introspective and methodological/contextual reflexivity with some bits of embodied and ethical reflexivity thrown in (Finlay, 2017; Walsh, 2024).

*As in my previous article, I'm using the terms good, bad, and ugly provocatively to make a point. Evaluations of qualitative research depend on the reader and the research context.*

*I personally enjoy artistic flair where authors use vivid language, and the research resonates. I am less keen on papers loaded with obscure jargon or which don't contextualize reflexively. While I respect scientific versions embracing post-positivist values when done well, I find dry, scientific language disengaged from a human science project makes me glaze over.*

*My aim in this paper is to interrogate what that "doing it well" might entail taking account of the researcher's specific epistemological and methodological commitments. With this in mind, I have tried to show a range of examples and viewpoints and not let my personal commitment to bias my presentation. (My preferred methodology is hermeneutic phenomenology, but I appreciate reflexive approaches in general). I leave it to you, the reader, to decide if I have been sufficiently even-handed.*

## Defining Qualitative Research

"Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Using personal accounts of experiences, observations of behaviour, and/or by investigating social processes, it aims to examine what it means to be a human being in the social world. Qualitative research produces descriptive and non-numerical data and systematically searches for patterns and meanings which are contextualised (Finlay & Ballinger, 2006).

While *quantitative* research can be loosely grouped into surveys, experiments, and/or systematic reviews, the countless forms of what constitutes *qualitative* research defies easy categorization. Some qualitative studies are scientifically

orientated; others more explicitly artful or philosophical. Some will utilize just a single case study; others will include several participants. Data can span a mass of writings, including literature over the centuries, or just one person's blog. The procedures used to gather and analyse data are similarly varied spanning systematic, structured forms at one end to more intuitive, textured and/or artful renderings at the other. Qualitative research is thus understood and operationalized in hugely varying ways. What is viewed as "good" research depends on the methodology and context of the research, including the researcher's epistemological commitments.

There are numerous *methodological* approaches on offer: phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, action research, (auto-)biographical/historical approaches, ethnography, discourse analysis, conversational analysis, cooperative enquiry, intuitive inquiry, feminist approaches, ethnomethodology, heuristic research, and arts-based research, to name a few. Each of these offer distinctive characteristics, styles, and research designs, even if they employ similar research methods, such as interviews or thematic analysis. What makes it even more complicated is that within each methodology competing versions apply!

Across the spectrum of different qualitative methodologies, however, they all acknowledge and value (to a greater or lesser extent) the following:

- 1) The researcher is the central figure who influences and constructs the collection, selection, and interpretation of data. Their **subjectivity** is at the heart of the research, and this is celebrated. While quantitative researchers would critique such research as being "biased," qualitative researchers view subjectivity as opening up special opportunities and insights.
- 2) There is a need for the researcher to be **reflexive** given the role they are playing in the construction of knowledge and the significance of the researcher's relationship with participants and/or the social world. Qualitative researchers recognize how both researchers and participants are influenced by their contexts and relationships in the wider social world. Researchers' historical-cultural situatedness needs acknowledgment ideally.
- 3) Qualitative research embraces rich, textured, evocative **exploration** (descriptive and inductive; possibly interpretive) that has the potential to move others and be revelatory – even revolutionary. The intention is

hypothesis-generating; qualitative research often ends with more questions than answers in contrast to the hypothesis-testing approach of quantitative research. For instance, instead of testing whether a treatment intervention is effective by comparing a treatment group with a control group, the qualitative researcher would seek to explore: “How do clients experience this treatment?”

- 4) Qualitative research prizes the process of **emergent meanings** where researchers recognise the complex, layered and messy nature of the findings. Meanings are understood to evolve and arise out of particular social contexts. Findings therefore tend to be partial, indexical, tentative, ambiguous (even ambivalent), and open to multiple interpretations. Given the complex and chaotic social world that qualitative researchers are attempting to explore, clear-cut simplistic cause and effect formulations cannot work. Thus, researchers appreciate that others using the same data, could well see different things and unfold different stories.
- 5) Qualitative researchers recognise that research is **co-constituted** and arises in a specific context - a joint product of the relationships between participants, researchers and readers. Participants will affect the researcher just as the researcher affects the participants. Readers themselves will be impacted and understand findings in unpredictable ways. To ensure ethical integrity of the study, researchers may well acknowledge these processes. (Finlay & Ballinger, 2006)

*I find myself wondering if all this preamble about qualitative research is needed but it feels important to put basic markers down. I fight the urge to tell novice researchers, “This is what you’re committing to. Get on board!” I settle for a more measured positioning of qualitative research.*

*And, even as I stress the importance of reflexivity, and try to offer some in these italicized sections, I am aware that I have already – and inevitably – fallen short by not offering my “historical-cultural situatedness.” Do I need to be explicit about my credentials and qualitative research experience to show I am a sufficiently trustworthy “expert”? I decide that my glancing references about myself (plus the biography at the end) are sufficient. Then I smile at this - there is a distinct whiff of what discourse analysts call “stake inoculation.”*

*This is when a researcher heads off possible criticisms and rebuts claims that they have a stake in what they are writing before others challenge them.*

## Mapping Qualitative Methodologies

Just as psychotherapists embrace particular theoretical perspectives and *paradigms* (world views) so, too, do researchers. One way of making sense of the range of qualitative methodologies on offer is to recognise how they each stem from particular epistemological commitments even if the researcher is not explicit about these in their write-up. As Wertz et al (2011, p. 4) emphasise, “qualitative analyses are not mere application of technical procedures”; instead, they involve a “unique qualitative stance and worldview.”

Novice researchers who are planning their qualitative research can fall into the trap of focusing on “methods” of data collection and analysis (e.g., doing interviews) without first locating the method within a broader *methodology* (method + epistemology + philosophy). Qualitative research is always underpinned (implicitly or explicitly) by certain philosophical positions where data collection/analysis procedures are just tools applied accordingly. An interview conducted by a phenomenologist is going to be different from one by a narrative researcher. Thematic analysis conducted by a grounded theory researcher will be different from one employing discourse analysis.

While it may not be necessary to be explicit about epistemology in any one article (depending on the journal), researcher-authors must still appreciate the implications of where they stand or risk incoherent research. For example, it does not make sense to be using interpretive methodology while aiming for “truth” by engaging participant validation. Returning to participants to share findings would be a supportive, respectful, ethical gesture, but they do not need to agree with the researcher’s interpretations.

The debate between “**positivists**” and “**interpretivists**” is one way of characterizing the polarization of quantitative versus qualitative and “realist” versus “relativist” research (Finlay, 2006a; Willig, 2001). In simplistic terms, positivists aim for scientific “truth” while interpretivists explore multiple, contextualized meanings and interpretations. Positivists believe it is possible to gain true knowledge about an independently existing real material world. Interpretivists, on the other hand, argue that it is impossible to capture truth as it is relative and multiple possible meanings are involved: there is not one reality, but many; truth, they say, is socially constructed (or relationally co-created) and it all depends on one’s perspective and context.

Aiming for more nuanced distinctions, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) identify different paradigms including: constructivist-interpretive; positivist/post-positivist; critical (Marxist, emancipatory) and feminist-poststructuralist (see figure 1).

- The *constructivist-interpretive* paradigm tends to be the preferred one for most (qualitative) psychotherapy studies where there is an assumption that reality is inter-subjective, co-created and dependent on individuals' social location. This paradigm underpins most phenomenological, ethnographic, constructivist grounded theory and narrative research where researchers take more naturalistic or relativist stances which recognise multiple meanings and subjective realities.
- *Positivists/post-positivists* take a more explicitly “scientific” attitude as they adopt objectivist, realist approaches akin to quantitative researchers. This approach is most commonly seen in mixed methods studies and traditional objectivist grounded theory.
- The *critical* paradigm – found, for example, in politically-orientated emancipatory and ethnographic/sociological research (e.g., anti-colonial, anti-oppressive research) - privileges a materialist-realism. The particular ideas emphasized are that people are structured or shaped by socio-economic processes, power relationships, and intersectional interests.
- The *feminist-poststructuralist* paradigm recognises the socially contingent nature of identities (including gendered ones) and engages problems with social texts and their inability ever to represent the world. An example is some discourse analysis with its social constructionist goal of deconstructing the language used in particular instances and exploring its rhetorical functions.

The two latter paradigms tend to favour naturalistic, subjectivist and reflexive methodologies, including narrative and ethnographic work, which can sometimes lead to more literary or ironic presentations. The focus is on deconstructing traditional power hierarchies and give voice to previously marginalized minorities. Wertz (2011) expresses this movement in a wider context of the “qualitative revolution” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. ix):

In the time of increasingly empowered liberation movements, the hegemonic authority of traditional scientific methods began to give way to previously

marginalized and silenced ways of knowing that asserted equal and even superior value. (2011, p. 82)

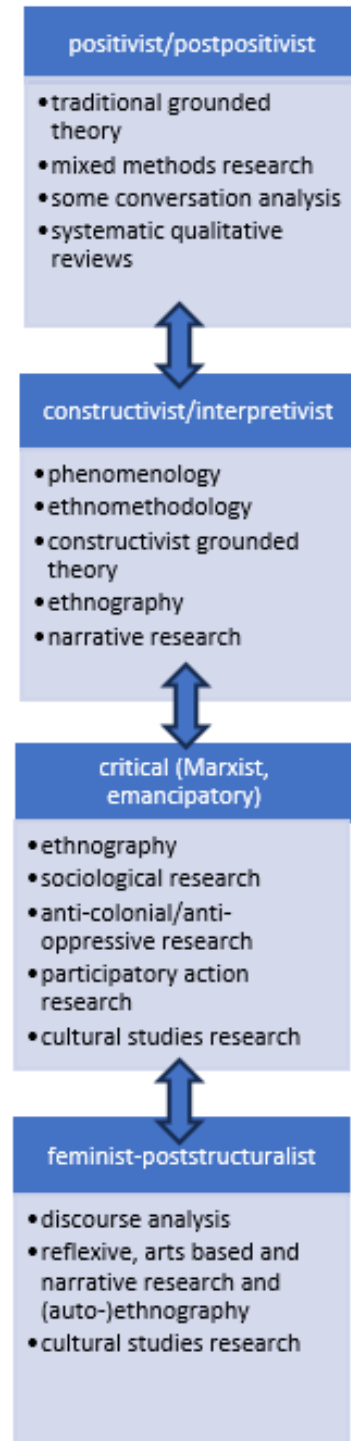


Figure 1: Paradigms and associated qualitative methodologies

As the qualitative research field is enlarging and becoming more established, boundaries between methodologies are being softened (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Sometimes they are

completely blurred - what I call “methodological mashups.” For example, in a phenomenological study on the lived experience of traumatic abortion I undertook with Barbara Payman (Finlay & Payman, 2012), we straddled three paradigms in a hermeneutic feminist framework to explore one case study (i.e., merging feminist, critical and interpretivist paradigms and combining a reflexive narrative case study with hermeneutic phenomenology). The use of multiple theoretical frameworks found in integrative psychotherapy offers an equivalent stance.

The question at stake when researchers embrace multiple, and potentially contradictory or competing, methodologies and orientations, is “To what extent are the researcher’s epistemological commitments coherently established towards ensuring methodological integrity?”

*I am pleased to have been able to draw the parallel with how psychotherapists choicefully embrace their theoretical positions. I think psychotherapist readers will identify. (And I am mindful that this article is destined to go into a journal where the readership are psychotherapists so it’s important to tune into this.)*

*Combining frameworks takes some finesse, however. I note that I have moderated the irritation I feel when I see practitioners or researchers muddying their waters by not appreciating the potential contradictions when applying competing theoretical frameworks (e.g., applying cognitive behavioural techniques when using a person-centred framework). The research equivalent is when a researcher claims to be engaging phenomenology but uses structured proforma questions or makes psychoanalytic interpretations. Or, as another example, we might have a researcher claiming a constructivist-interpretivist epistemological position, who then talks about participant validation to ensure ‘truth’. The end result is research that simply doesn’t hang together.*

results. This also means qualitative studies cannot easily be replicated and so have limited reliability. Small sample sizes aiming for depth rather than breadth of findings mean that the research is unlikely to be generalizable. So qualitative researchers have turned to other criteria more suited to their project ...

Lincoln and Guba (1985) talk instead about “trustworthiness” and originally proffered four equivalent qualitative evaluation criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. *Credibility* substitutes notions of internal validity to ensure findings make sense. They invite researchers to provide transparent and self-critical reflexive analyses that can function as an audit trail through their research processes giving readers enough information to judge the trustworthiness of the research. *Transferability* replaces the concepts of external validity and generalizability highlighting ways the research findings might be applied in other contexts. *Dependability* (would another researcher find similar results) and *confirmability* (ensuring results are based in data) substitute reliability and objectivity, respectively.

Other researchers have contested these criteria arguing they are unduly preoccupied with scientific rigour. In the feminist post-structural paradigm, ethical collaboration and evocative, reflexive presentations are privileged while Bochner (2001), calls for narrative and sociological researchers to “give voice to experiences that have been shrouded in silence, to bring our intellect and emotionality together, to merge the personal and the academic, and to give something back to others draws us to the poetic, moral, and political side of narrative work” (Bochner, 2001, p. 155).

Various authors have further waded into this field attempting to articulate appropriate evaluation formula. Of note is Tracy’s (2010) 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. She suggests these offer a “shorthand” for crafting qualitative research. In a similar vein, I have stepped into the fray offering two evaluation guides: 5 C’s – Clarity, Coherence, Contribution, Credibility, Creativity (Finlay, 2006b) and 4 R’s – Rigour, Resonance, Relevance, Reflexivity (Finlay & Evans, 2009).

Which criteria is selected depends on the nature of the project and methodology. But it gets even more complicated as different criteria are needed for the varying methodologies under each main umbrella methodology.

## Criteria for Evaluating Research

Traditional criteria used to evaluate scientific research of “validity,” “reliability,” “generalizability” does not make sense for qualitative research. Validity is less relevant because the subjective social processes qualitative researchers grapple with cannot be adequately captured and measured. Different researchers, participants, and research contexts will influence

More recently, the overall concept of *methodological integrity* has been helpfully highlighted. Levitt (2017) states that integrity in qualitative research is established when: research designs and methodologies support the research goals and what research problems/questions are being studied. She calls on us to respect the researcher's approaches to inquiry (including their philosophical/epistemological assumptions). The question then at stake is "Does this study make sense *in its own terms*?" Any evaluation needs to be done from *within* the perspective taken and criteria related to other paradigms should not be applied. Charmaz' (2014) constructivist grounded theory, in other words, should not be critiqued using criteria to judge traditional objectivist grounded theory and vice versa.

Levitt (2017) further proposes that methodological integrity involves establishing *fidelity* and *utility*. Fidelity is demonstrated when: researchers connect with the phenomenon being studied; the data is appropriate to the methodology; and the findings are plausibly grounded in that data. If a study has good utility, its findings will be useful, interesting and/or insight generating.

Beyond any set criteria, qualitative researchers are called to celebrate their *reflexive-relational capacity* within our methodological integrity (Finlay, 2021; Walsh, 2024). Their mission is to acknowledge the enrichment, revelation and nuanced complexity that emerges from qualitative research (Sass, 2022) and how this might be communicated in the writing up process (Richardson, 2000). The particular role, style, and subjectivity of individual researchers are so variable that reflexive examinations are important (Wertz et al., 2011). At the very least, qualitative researchers need to show some depth of reflection and reflexivity related to their personal, interpersonal, methodological, and contextual positionings (Walsh, 2024; Finlay, 2017).

*I am bored with this section on "criteria for evaluation." I've taught and written about this stuff so many times, I can feel my impatience. I hope this isn't negatively impacting my writing(?) I am aware that there is a danger of being too "pat" or overly rehearsed which could be a turn off and lose the sense of immediacy (i.e., that I am present and thus invite you, the reader, to be present).*

*The important thing is not the criteria, it is the spirit of how they are specifically operationalized. My internal critic nudges me to give some examples.*

*I'll start with phenomenology, I decide, as that is my comfort zone, but then other applications need to be*

*highlighted in as much depth and precision. Grounded theory and discourse analysis would show epistemological range. Strategically thinking about word count, I decide to show the range in grounded theory but highlight discourse analysis in an extended exemplar.*

## Examples of "competing criteria" within methodologies

The criteria that are brought to bear depends on the *specific* methodology but there is often little consensus.

For example, to evaluate **phenomenological** studies different criteria are utilized. For instance, van Manen's literary hermeneutic approach focuses ambitiously on the quality of writing - how well it evokes and the extent that it "enthral us with insights into the enigma of life as we experience it." (van Manen, 2017, p. 779). Giorgi (2009), favouring his more scientifically-orientated descriptive phenomenology, wants instead to assure a study's rigour and adherence to a systematic, methodical phenomenological method (embracing *Epoché*, *eidetic reduction* and *intentional analysis*). Keen (2003) argues for "vividness", "accuracy", "richness" and "elegance" in being attentive to both structure and texture. Smith et al. (2009) use Yardley's (2000) criteria to assess the quality of more interpretative and idiographically focused Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: "sensitivity to context"; "commitment and rigour"; "transparency and coherence"; and "impact and importance."

**Grounded theory** similarly contains different variants – see Charmaz & Thornberg (2021) for details of how to evaluate the different versions. Traditional grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) - including positivist variants such as Glaser (1992) and post-positivist ones of Corbin & Strauss (2008) - is critical realist in orientation favouring criteria around rigour and being objective. Charmaz (2014) then evolved her pragmatist and relativist social constructionist approach. Taking a constructivist-interpretivist line where truth is seen as provisional, she argues for a greater role for reflexivity proposing four main criteria: "credibility," "originality," "resonance," and "usefulness." Charmaz recommends evaluating whether evolving theory illuminates different kinds of taken for granted meanings. While the primary focus is on the theory's ability to show participants' lives, resulting theory may also be helpful to participants and contribute to the pool of world benefitting research.

Here, I am highlighting the point that evaluation of research needs to engage criteria related to the methodology rather

than applying criteria external to it. Qualitative studies *need to be evaluated in their own terms*.

## Good,” “Bad” and “Ugly”

Research will be judged in different ways. Whether research is seen as “good,” “bad” or “ugly” depends on whether what researchers are trying to achieve is being appropriately studied. But evaluations also depend on the beholder – the audience-readers - and what they are looking for. Is the research of value and does it have professional relevance and interest? Evaluations of research need to consider the quality and process of the methodology (*process* - how it was done) *and* contribution of the findings (the *outcome*). There is a lot to consider; a depth of reflection is needed while recognising there are few definitive absolutes.

“Good” qualitative research in general:

1. Spells out (or at least indicates) **epistemological and methodological commitments** - Is there a clear link to epistemological (i.e., philosophy + methodology) commitments and does the author locate and evaluate their work in an appropriate, reasoned way?
2. Ensures the **methodology and methods** of data collection and analysis are clearly described and both coherent and systematically applied.
3. Demonstrates **ethical integrity** going beyond simple acknowledgements of participant anonymity – Researchers need instead to show how they have enacted their duty of care for their participants (and perhaps also take into account their audience/readers and themselves). Have appropriate consents/approvals been obtained and acknowledged? Has the author(s) shown sensitivity and an ethical sensibility?
4. Offers in-depth findings that are **rich, resonant, and nuanced**. Bland, banal themes or trite, uninteresting narratives need to be avoided, while writing style needs to be engaging and readable.
5. Ensures the findings are appropriately **evidenced and substantiated** (e.g., using references to participants’ words or the wider literature). Unsubstantiated, polemic

assertions are ideally avoided except as part of reflexive exploration.

6. Shows its broader **relevance** – Are understandings and implications stemming from the research spelt out? Has the author shown awareness of any debate context? Will readers find the research of interest and value? Are there points or issues raised that are particularly interesting,

strong, or original? For published papers, the researcher needs to consider the suitability of their article for the particular journal and/or for their personal/professional context.

7. Demonstrates **critical thinking** and/or appropriate **researcher reflexivity** – Is the research (context and processes) examined with a thoughtful eye? This includes ensuring literature reviews are critical and there is some evaluation of both methodology and findings. Reflexive acknowledgment of the impact of the relationship between participants and researchers might also be appropriate depending on the methodology. At the very least, there needs to be some social/ideological positioning of the researcher. How are they present in the research? How have they impacted the research direction?

How these various elements are operationalized depends, at least in part, on the chosen methodology. “Good” research shows an understanding of both the processes and implications of the methodology. This impacts the aims and design of the study and the style and content of any findings, and how they should be evaluated.

“Bad” qualitative research:

1. **Lacks methodological integrity** – Here, the researcher’s methodological commitments may not be identified. Alternatively, are the methods of data collection and analysis not transparently accounted for? Perhaps the methods of data collection are not appropriate, or the analytic approach is not coherent and systematically applied.
2. **Does not reveal anything new** or of interest, or its findings are unconvincing such as when the participants’ words are reproduced without context or analysis.
3. **Makes too many assumptions**, assertions and is insufficiently argued with evidence. Specifically, is the researcher coming across as dogmatic or arrogant, not

showing sufficient humility about the limits of what can be known?

4. **Is ethically dodgy** having negative or damaging consequences.
5. **Does not show depth of reflection** and critical thinking, and/or is missing a reflexive element.

“Ugly” qualitative research:

1. Is **indigestible** (e.g., overwhelming the reader with scientific jargon or too many layers of themes). This just shows the researcher has not taken enough care to present the research in a manner which suits the audience.
2. Is **written in a sloppy way** in being banal, poorly expressed and/or unduly clichéd.
3. Results in destructive or **damaging outcomes** (whether intended or not).

*I've finally got to the meat of my paper and that feels like progress. But is this section going to engage readers or will their eyes glaze over with so many lists and assertions? Have I been too dogmatic?*

*It's not all that easy to determine good, bad, ugly qualitative research as much depends on methodology and on the “eye of the beholder.” I had hoped to end the article here, but now I see that I need to offer more specific, applied examples. Perhaps, too, I need to model “being critical?” That feels quite exposing. Hmm... I decide to go for it anyway.*

## Evaluating literature reviews

Literature reviews are often the starting point of any research project and serve as the ground for future research. They are also a method of research in their own right. They have the potential to contribute to knowledge, assess the state-of-the-art and practice, contribute to emerging theory, evaluate the current evidence base, and inform future research (Snyder, 2023).

There are several distinct types of literature reviews including:

1. **Narrative or scoping reviews** (Baumeister & Leary, 1997) are most used in qualitative studies. These descriptively summarise and critically analyse the body of research around the topic of interest interrogating any gaps, limitations or inconsistencies in research reviewed. This

type of review usually forms a rationale for the empirical study being reported. But it is also possible to have a “review article” which is a journal-length paper which aims to synthesize the literature in a field, without collecting or analyzing any primary data (an example is Finlay, 2023).

2. **Systematic literature reviews** are rigorously and methodically conducted and are often focused on a specific question or types of research (e.g., reviewing just Randomised Controlled Trials- RCTs) (Davis et al., 2014). They might also specify time frames (such as investigating the research in the field over the last 10 years). Quantitative and post-positivist leaning literature reviews often take a more deductive approach and engage “*meta-analyses*” to identify patterns across research using standardized statistical procedures, though qualitative versions using traditional grounded theory are possible. By combining results from many studies, meta-analysis increases the sample size and so can analyse effects. Qualitative, interpretivist versions more commonly embrace “*meta-synthesis*” which is associated with an inductive approach which explores meanings and integrates findings across qualitative studies which can lead to new theory.
3. **Theoretical reviews** encompass the pool of accumulated theory regarding a concept, issue or phenomenon establishing what theories exist and what is known or still under-theorized.

A “good” review depends, in part, on the nature of the project (Snyder, 2023). A narrative review can afford to be more descriptive, creative, idiosyncratic, and less structured whereas a systematic review needs to be scientifically approached and engaged with rigour. Whatever version, qualitative reviews are more trustworthy and credible when presented in a way that reflexively acknowledges the personal and social processes that constitute them (Sandelowski, 2006; Thorne, et al., 2004). Better reviews are also more *critical* – both about the methods used and in terms of the findings being discussed. Strategic decisions about the scope of the review and ideally the rationale for the choices made need to



be transparent (reflexivity). Ideally, limitations in the research being reviewed are identified and/or debates are highlighted.

Beyond methodology, findings need to contribute meaningful knowledge, helping readers get up to date with the research and debates. The review needs to be packaged in a coherent, informative, ideally interesting, way where findings are unfolded in a way that makes sense. A caveat is that literature reviews are limited by the research that is out there and that needs to be considered.

“Bad” reviews, in my view at least, have not sufficiently defined the logic of the review, such as offering an idiosyncratic, random selection of references. Weaker reviews also tend to fall back on reviewing theory and miss the opportunity to identify the research base, miss out key material, or lack references to up-to-date research and debates.

“Bad” qualitative reviews also assume that they are identifying “truth.” Thorne et al. (2004) speak of the “the persistent assumptive baggage that comes with the analogy to meta-analysis in quantitative research.” They note how some qualitative metasynthesis reports “convey a similar tone of having discovered decisive ‘truth,’ which ... creates a serious credibility problem for the genre.” (Thorne et al., 2004, p. 1361)

“Bad” reviews also make unfounded claims – extrapolating erroneously from limited data, for instance. Or, they assert, “there is limited research on this topic,” when there is actually evidence which has been ignored.

“Ugly” reviews are, the ones which mislead, misrepresent, and perhaps even end up being harmful. As an editor, I have frequently found researcher-authors wrongly claim, “There is *little or no* research on [the topic of interest]” whereas what they mean is that the researcher-author hasn’t yet found it (perhaps because they aren’t using the right search terms or trawling widely enough). Sometimes, it seems the author’s own articles are selectively favoured which could be seen as a cynical, partisan attempt to advance their own views, publications, or theory. This process also occurs more subtly when important contradictory evidence is missing or played down, or when debates remain unopened, or when “facts” are asserted without nuance or context.

I like the humble position adopted by Thorne et al. (2004, p. 1362) who advocate for:

qualitative metasynthesis ... standards in which our knowledge claims remain grounded in a genuine mantle of

humility, the inherent complexity of that which we study remains intact, and the measure of our product is determined by criteria derived from both art and science.

### “Good” example

The paper by Levitt et al. (2016) reviews the research on clients’ experiences of psychotherapy. The researchers utilize a qualitative meta-analysis of the literature

on clients’ experiences in therapy looking across different therapeutic approaches. They reviewed sixty-seven studies engaging a *grounded theory meta-analysis* to develop a hierarchy of data and then, for good measure, added forty-two more studies using a *content meta-analysis*. So, a large number of studies (109) were reviewed in all.

In their conclusion, they present the implications of their findings clearly:

Across these meta-analytic findings is the insistent reminder that clients come to us with a sense of their problems, a lived experience of their histories and cultures, and a proclivity to be engaged in the interactive healing process. In general, when therapists engaged clients’ curiosity, clients engaged in self-reflection. When therapists demonstrated authentic care and acceptance, clients reported safety to explore threatening themes. In talking explicitly about their roles and the power dynamics that existed in their relationships, clients overcame barriers and become active collaborators in the therapy process. The safety and support from this structure granted clients the ability to engage in their own vulnerable and risky work and begin to recognize underlying needs via the identification of patterns in their lives. Through developing a holistic understanding of their patterns, they reported making changes across contexts, relationships, and personal faculties. Seeing clients as people with these potentials and constructing the therapist role as support for their agency can be a place from which to begin. (2016, pp. 824-5)

Demonstrating that clients value being active participants in the therapy process, Levitt et al (2016) argue for an alternate agenda where *relational*, as well as therapist and client factors, are seen as driving factors in psychotherapy outcomes. Their findings offer a valuable, relevant guide for practitioners and are likely to help therapists be more sensitive to clients’ critical experiences in sessions.

As a *meta-analytic* literature review, it offers a trustworthy snapshot of current research that has been rigorously compiled. Most qualitative reviews utilize interpretive meta-synthesis and engage significantly fewer studies so, a strength of this research is their attempt to trawl widely.

However, the sample still needs further interrogation. There are limitations which the authors note, including how the quality of their findings depends partly on the quality of the research available. They are suitably critical that their section of studies should be viewed as a sample and not representative of all qualitative studies. They note that single case studies were excluded as idiosyncratic versions and narrative formats make it challenging to compare and code results meaningfully. While the authors critique some lack of ethnic diversity, they do not acknowledge that their research pool was primarily from research conducted in the US which reveals a broader bias in published empirical research coming out of Western/US cultural frames.

In terms of findings, there is a lot of material to digest in this article and some might find it rather dry and unappealing. Readers are given much depth and detail, however. The article persuasively argues that therapists (and researchers) should be informed by *qualitative* evidence about clients' experiences of therapy rather than focusing solely on quantitative outcomes evidence and therapist-related factors. The authors present their authoritative insights into the research out there and offer a significant pool of references/resources to chase up depending on one's interests. In these ways, this literature review carries high utility, and findings are informative. The review's methodological integrity is also shown in the rigorous and transparent meta-analysis using grounded theory and content analytic methods to extract themes, an approach that is consistent with the authors' scientific approach and implicit post-positivist ideals.

*Writing this critique, I'm aware that I have written many literature reviews which are less critical and impressive. In fact, if I think of all the published literature reviews I've read, most are less critical than they could be. In practice, we often fall short of the "ideal", particularly when constraining word counts don't let us show our full range of our analysis.*

*I have chosen an impressive and critical article as an exemplar here, but I'm left feeling uncomfortable. Most qualitative researchers would not engage in meta-analysis and work at this depth/detail – myself included. Should I have given a more common example? On the other hand, I want to show novice researchers what is possible when trying to be rigorously scientific.*

*I decide that my example is a useful resource for readers providing "hard" evidence they can draw on to justify their research and practice which tries to honour clients' perspectives. Plus, the next two sections are more constructivist-interpretivist which ensures a contrast.*

## Evaluating phenomenological research

There is a lot of qualitative research out there which calls itself "phenomenological" simply because it engages subjective experience but does the study explicate pre-reflective lifeworldly experience or is it simply about experience? Numerous qualitative research approaches discuss experience including narrative research, grounded theory, ethnographic research, and arts-based research. But these do not engage the phenomenological attitude and reductions (van Manen, 2017). A study purporting to be phenomenological, may be phenomenologically inspired, but without a clear understanding of what phenomenology is trying to do, it cannot be said to be "phenomenology." (Finlay, forthcoming) A phenomenological study needs to explore individuals' consciousness/experience and lifeworld holistically. A study that sets out to compare one treatment with another would not be phenomenological. A study which just looks at emotion or thinking without reference to the body and/or lifeworld is not phenomenological. A study which ultimately aims to be critical of social processes and is politically-driven with an agenda or emancipatory aims, is probably not entirely phenomenological.

For a phenomenological study to be effective, the researcher needs to be drawn in to see the world in a fresh way having engaged a *phenomenological attitude* (which includes bracketing). Research can get stuck in the "natural attitude" when researchers simply cite participants' words (reproducing participants' taken-for-granted understandings). When analyzing too, researchers must go beyond their own assumptions and allow themselves to be impacted by their discoveries, i.e., to grow and go beyond the obvious or self-evident.

Phenomenology aims to *describe* lived experience – namely, to highlight psychological meanings already present in

experiencers' lifeworlds. But, as van Manen and van Manen (2021, p. 1071) note,

“direct description” of experience is not just narratively reporting, copying, or telling a story. Rather, to de-scribe is to write directly (unravel or uncover) what remained hidden or concealed. Doing phenomenology on the phenomena means taking up the attitude of immediate

seeing and practicing an attentive awareness to the things of the world as we live them rather than as we conceptualize or theorize them. Direct description is making straight sense of the originary meanings of lived or inceptual experience (the primal phenomena and events as given in or as consciousness).

“Good” phenomenological research then:

- Engages a **phenomenological attitude** and not simply reproducing what participants say, or presenting what the researcher believes, in their natural attitude;
- **Describes** the phenomenon in a rich, layered, evocative way;
- Focuses on **pre-reflective** experience/consciousness;
- Is grounded in phenomenological **philosophy** (for the method and/or description);
- Grapples **holistically** with layered complexity and ambiguity of embodied (inter-)subjective lifeworldly meanings and what it means to be human. (Finlay, Forthcoming)

More specifically, the design and write up of the research would also need to clearly follow a specified phenomenological approach, showing awareness that there are debates within the phenomenological field about phenomenological methods. A Giorgi-inspired “*descriptive phenomenology*” (Giorgi, 2009) needs to rigorously engage a close reading that moves from in-depth phenomenal description to both individual (idiographic) and general (nomothetic) psychological understandings of an experience. It is both detailed and painstaking when done well. See for instance, Wertz (1983).

However, with a “*hermeneutic phenomenological approach*” following van Manen, the focus is on ensuring an evocative write up. As Wertz et al. (2011, p. 130) acknowledge: “Phenomenology is neither a doctrine nor a contrived method but a diverse, living movement that is still changing. ... The flexibility of the method allows its creative adaptation to diverse topics, research problems, and styles of researchers.”

“Bad” phenomenological research, in my view at least, does not engage the phenomenological attitude and the resulting descriptions do not reveal or evoke taken-for-granted, implicit meanings. This is seen most commonly when researchers merely reproduce what participants say without recognizing they are in their “natural attitude.” The problem is underlined if the researcher goes on to try to explain and theorize the experience moving beyond the data and the phenomenological description, e.g., bringing in an external framework such as psychoanalytic interpretations. In short, the researcher is not showing an appreciation of the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology.

“Bad” phenomenological research is also that which offers bland, uninteresting descriptions and/or occurs when the research focuses in a reductionist way on just thinking or feeling without a proper lifeworldly perspective. To be phenomenological there needs to be a recognition of the body and the person’s lived social world (e.g., their sense of lived time, space, discourse, and relations with others ...).

“Ugly” phenomenology occurs in papers which misunderstand the nature of phenomenology and/or when the phenomenon itself is effectively “killed off” instead of being brought to life. We see such butchered products in papers which are trying to follow positivist principles where the researcher tries to be objective engaging dry description which misses the phenomenological point. Of note here are the papers which attempt to draw on many participants in a fruitless effort to get a “significant” result which can be “generalized” more widely. If a researcher needs to grapple with the accounts of twenty participants, how deeply can they be expected to go? A study offering accounts from just 3-6 participants (or even just one!) is more likely to get at the ambiguous sedimented depth of implicit meanings required.

### “Good” example

A “good” *descriptive phenomenological* example, in my view, is one by Rao (2006) who describes the experience of self-cutting by offering a composite narrative of several cutter’s accounts.

She starts by acknowledging how the cutter experiences her body as a “container” of emotional pain and that she “condemns” herself to self-inflicted punishment. “Through blood-letting, she vents rage, invites tears, or leaks evil material.” (2006, p. 52)

She recognizes the cutter’s shame and possible feelings of being trapped and rejected are precipitated by a stressful context of a painful interpersonal event.

The cutter opens lacerations and feels “a high.” The act of cutting diminishes the rising pressure, racing thoughts, and overwhelming emotions. She is assured by the ability to create, localize, and regulate cutting. This is the one action she can take in a time of helpless desperation. Cutting is always a comforting movement that momentarily frees her from the “stuckness” of suffering. It is healing to recover a sense of calm, mastery, and agency ... . It is healing to reveal and release hidden emotional pain. Wounding herself makes the invisible, palpably visible and tangible.

Hers is a language of pain; her lacerations, efforts to make sense of that pain... Amid her overwhelm, she is relieved to focus ... Following cutting, she has a reason to engage in nurturing self-care. Physical healing may parallel emotional healing. ... The act of self-cutting pulls her together only to tear her apart with its self-destructive, shaming, and addictive consequences. Nevertheless, “wounding to heal” is the cutter’s way of coping... and surviving. (Rao, 2006, p. 56)

In the broader paper, Rao’s detailed, evocative, embodied, existential description gives special insight into a complicated, ambivalent process. In particular, she implicitly highlights the cutter’s subjective *lifeworld*: embodiment (“bodily discomfort”); relationship with self (caring-taking) and others (shame, rejection); and a sense space (feeling “trapped”).

Rao offers a composite narrative which glosses over individual differences and their particular stories. With more word space, Rao may have been able to better show her analytic process as moving from individual narratives to the composite one. However, her empathetic and resonant synthesized description of the emotional storm of self-cutting is substantiated by references to quotations from her six participants while the theoretical/philosophical literature related to self-cutting is trawled to provide a deeper exploration of meanings.

Psychotherapists, particularly those who work with people who self-harm, will probably identify with this research, finding it both interesting and professionally relevant. Some readers, however, may feel excluded from the analysis as the exploration is based solely on female participants (with the author using “she”) and questions are raised about the extent the research applies more widely beyond the women that were interviewed.

In terms of her methodology, she attempts to engage rigour by adhering systematically to Giorgi’s method of data analysis. She notes how the process of discovering the “general structure”/“essential elements” of self-cutting began with

focusing on smaller segments of narrative to produce some psychological themes about the individual cutters’ experience. After asking, “What is essential to this person’s experience?” she focused on the phenomenon rather than the person (2006, p. 46).

The researcher is neither reflexive nor explicit about her epistemological stance. Rao states that she works in private practice and at a Counseling Center, where interests include cutting, self-esteem, eating disorders, relationship issues.

However, we do not hear if/how she engaged the *Epoché* to put aside and restrain pre-understandings. She asserts that she followed Giorgi’s method so we might assume that she took care with her phenomenological analysis. She certainly appears to have engaged a methodical, evidenced approach which is the kind of “science” Giorgi argues for (Applebaum, 2012). Phrases like “Findings were shared with participants to ensure accuracy” (p. 46) perhaps reveal some leanings towards a more “realist”, “postpositivist” stance.

In short, I would say that Rao provides a lovely existential analysis but the methodology, without more detail, needs further interrogation and contextualizing, and could be subject to critique, including from *within* the descriptive phenomenological camp. See, for instance, Walsh’s (2024) discussion of reflexivity related to descriptive phenomenology. However, before we rush to being too critical, we must recognise that the journal’s constraining word count meant there was a limit to what the author could write about. In other words, it is important to consider the context of the work and publication, and to recognise the value in what one short article reveals.

*In my efforts to be evenhanded and not privilege phenomenology, have I over-compensated? I’ve chosen an article that is limited in its account of methodology and being small scale, it is not comparable to the more extensive research engaged by the other exemplars described. Will phenomenology come across as a “weaker” methodology?*

*You could say that I’ve missed a (partisan) opportunity to celebrate phenomenology more and show its comparative strengths. On the other hand, I like this article for all that it has weaknesses and gaps. I’ve done a lot of work with people who self-harm and I think Rao captures something special missing in other research about cutting.*

*Authors of descriptive phenomenological studies are often not explicit about engaging reflexivity (though, if they have applied the Epoché and reductions, reflexivity is inherent). I*

*decide to leave this exemplar in as think readers will relate and it offers an opportunity to highlight consequences when reflexive elements are missing.*

## Evaluating narrative-ethnographic research

Narrative research aims to capture human experience and meanings by representing these interpretively in textual or other artful forms. Narrative researchers usually work with small samples of participants to obtain in-depth, rich, free-ranging accounts (Riessman, 1993).

There are many forms and genres of narrative research including life-story research, (auto-)biography, oral history, narrative inquiry and versions embracing culturally-orientated (auto-)ethnographic research (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). To ensure the narrative is research-based (i.e., aiming to generate knowledge), researchers are analytical and identify patterns, intentions, effects and/or implications of the narrative, perhaps setting them in a broader socio-cultural context. In other words, the research involves more than a story (Charmaz, 2014).

The empirical study of narrative is, like phenomenology, a science of subjectivity. It uses research to examine meaning-making and tends to be both inductive (allowing the data to speak) and interpretive. The research might focus on the explicit content of the stories or implicit themes or looking at the process of storying itself and how identity is shaped through the stories we tell.

Given its many forms, there is no prescribed way of doing narrative work. The value of narrative research is the stories told. They potentially offer subjective insights and broader social/contextual understanding.

Generally speaking, “good” versions are well written, engaging, poignant, and even inspiring. As with both “good” phenomenology and literature, “good” narrative research offers deeper understandings and takes readers with them. The particular strength of narrative research is that it allows for creative layered presentations which enable *multiple voices* to be heard. At their best, they empower the participants who tell their stories, and readers who may identify.

“Bad” narrative research speaks in generalities and misses the power of individuals’ stories. When narratives are too

anecdotal (perhaps acting like glorified blogs), the analytical-interpretive research and writing component is weak. Narrative research is weak also when the researcher makes too many assumptions and does not recognise how the narratives are understood differently according to readers and their cultural context.

“Ugly” narrative research is simply dull and boring, perhaps written in dreary, uninteresting ways. Ugly narrative research is also that which is ethically damaging.

### “Good” example

Across several publications, Kiesinger has sought to give anorexic and bulimic women an opportunity to tell their stories towards enabling new understandings and dialogues about women, food, and body image. She chose a narrative and (auto-)ethnographic approach, working reflexively with several women’s stories recognizing the relational impact of her own experience of bulimia.

The following excerpt from one of these papers (Kiesinger, 1998), tells one women’s life story (Abbie) and is a good example of this genre. Kiesinger starts by inviting Abbie to talk about her childhood (using “interactive interviewing technique”).

I listened patiently and compassionately, taking her hand when she seemed in need of comfort, offering her Kleenex to dry her tears. I listened with my entire body, trembling inside as she shook while recounting her repeated rape experiences. I choked each time her voice broke and quivered. ... The emotional and relational investment I had to make in order to hear and then later write Abbie's story was immense. [1998, section “The Project”; paragraph 25] Abbie then recounts how she had been 4 years old when she was first molested by her uncle:

He handles me sloppily, carelessly. His skin feels damp. His odor is pungent, sour. And then there is this crushing, weighted sensation, and I feel I am choking. I can't breathe.

I feel like I am going to die. Afterwards, I throw up. I still remember how my body shook, the deep heave, the bitter, stinging taste, the orange-brown color.

I didn't know what it was that he had done to me. I didn't know that it was wrong, but it felt wrong. "It" was undefinable, and it continued to feel bad for a long time. ...

Every woman in my family ... and all of their daughters--has been molested.

Every woman in my family struggles with food [and] ... feels ashamed. [1998, section "The Project"; paragraphs 30-40]

Later in her paper, Kiesinger reflexively describes the process she went through to construct and craft Abbie's life story detailing how she moved from her interviews to the story that was eventually told. The aim to tell a life story is ambitious and Kiesinger acknowledges it is *her* take, one lens to view Abbie's story. Throughout, she shows her commitment to relational ethics, showing her care for Abbie. She also recognises the impact on herself and how Abbie helped her to understand more about her own life as well as eating disorders.

Kiesinger's creative methodology is arguably more focused on resonance rather than rigour and it emerged over time. The engaging literary style was chosen to have impact. Abbie's story could, of course, be told in multitude of ways. Some might suggest that Kiesinger's artful narrative writing approach with its constructivist-interpretivist lens, moves closer to being literature rather than being research. However, her use of direct quotations from Abbie helped retain a "research" rather than "literary" sensibility, while her in-depth reflexivity about her research process kept her anchored within the narrative-ethnographic frame.

The strength of this paper is the power and poignancy of an individual's story of being sexually abused. Is the information about eating disorders getting lost? The extent the findings apply similarly to others with eating disorders is a significant caution and discussion about the wider applicability of such case study research is needed. Kiesinger's wider research encompasses eating disorders across the anorexia and bulimia spectrum which is perhaps too broad for any generalised significance to be highlighted. Without further substantiation, questions can be raised about the message given that sexual abuse in childhood is necessarily linked to eating disorders later in life. However, there is strong quantitative evidence available - which Kiesinger does not mention - that shows statistically significant association between childhood sexual abuse and eating disorders (e.g., see the meta-analysis conducted by Chen et al., (2010) which has 3,162,318 participants).

The fact that this article is one of many around Kiesinger's research, raises the value and contribution of her research overall and allows greater depth of reflection. Arguably it isn't fair to directly compare small one-off empirical studies (such as Rao's above) with more in-depth studies informed by

ongoing work undertaken over years across many participants and papers (such as Kiesinger's).

*I find Kiesinger's writing compelling and heart-rending, hence my selection here. I'm acutely aware that I have not done justice to her research/writing. Limited word space and copyright concerns constrain me. I hope readers will be inspired to go to the source material.*

*Kiesinger was appreciative when I sought her permission to use part of Abbie's story; grateful to know Abbie's story lives on. I am reminded about the potential impact of our qualitative research work and my commitment is renewed.*

## Evaluating discourse analytic research

Like phenomenological and narrative researchers, discourse analysts are committed to careful and multiple readings of participant's words. However, the aims and assumptions of their project differ again. Rather than focusing on a person's experience, discourse analysts focus on "practices" and emphasize that experience is constructed. Different researchers will interpret differently so the idea of a "faithful account" does not apply.

Discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, et al., 2001) attempts to examine how meanings are created through language within different social contexts. Discursive researchers argue that language has certain functions (i.e., it is not neutral); it socially constructs our taken for granted realities, norms, while sedimenting power relationships. Discourse (talk and/or text) is analysed using questions such as, "What is the talk being used to do?" "How might this statement work ideologically?" and "What is absent from this version of the world?" (Potter & Wetherell, 1995, p. 90).

Like all the methodologies described above, there are competing versions. The fact that different trends and styles of discourse analysis exist fragments the field and can spawn confusions and tensions around methodological incompatibility between studies (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012).

Two main "camps" are commonly identified, namely:

- i. *Ethnomethodological conversation analysis* which offers fine-grained investigation of the action orientation of talk and what is accomplished by speech acts.
- ii. *Critical discourse analysis* (post-structural or Foucauldian) which explores socio-cultural aspects of language in terms of how subjects (people's subjectivity) are constructed and how power relationships naturalized.

The focus is often on how talk is "performed" as serving particular ends and drawing on culturally-available resources (McMullen, 2011).

"Good" discourse analysis engages a perspective that sets the relevance of micro-language use in wider relational and societal contexts. At their most effective, discourse analysts critically and interpretively interrogate the purpose and effects of language and how the values imbedded within relate to broader social/political and historical contexts.

"Bad" discourse analysis misses the discursive point in taking language use literally; seeing it as directly representing the way a person feels or thinks. Studies that oversimplify speech acts and/or ignore the social context and power relationships are reductionistic, while studies which ignore the researcher's positioning and stake in the research (and how data is gathered and analysed) are equally flawed.

"Bad" discourse analyses are also those which are not clear about their epistemological commitments and do not recognise the limitations of the methodological choices engaged regarding what may be being excluded from any analysis. Wetherell (1998, p. 24 of pdf) points out that the "problem with conversational analysts is that they rarely raise their eyes from the next turn in the conversation, and, further, this is not an entire conversation or sizeable slice of social life but usually a tiny fragment." At the same time, she also acknowledges that the problem with post-structuralist analysts is that they "rarely focus on actual social interaction."

What constitutes "ugly" discourse analysis partly depends on the "beholder" as well as what form is engaged when publishing findings. In some papers, speech is presented in such detail (indicating length of pauses, tone, etc.) that it is hard to follow if one is not well versed with the transcription conventions. However, in journals which commonly publish such articles, where readers are well versed with the practices, there would not be a problem.

Discursive studies can be densely argued which might overwhelm readers unfamiliar with this level of writing and the

intellectualizing of language can feel far removed from everyday talk and experience. In other words, accounts can be so full of jargon it is hard for anyone not versed in this field to understand the point and relevance of the research. Therapists may feel such research is distancing, counter-intuitive or even irrelevant to their practice concerns (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012).

### "Good" example

van der Merwe and Wetherell (2020), critically explore accounts of emoting within the therapeutic relationship to explore the profession's norms around emotional expression. Analysing transcripts of interviews with practicing psychologists (therapists), the authors examine "*interpretative repertoires*" (culturally familiar terms, tropes, and metaphors engaged) and associated "*subject positions*" (where people are discursively located in positions or represented in certain ways). They discuss psychologists' dilemmas concerning the construction of emotion and how this demarcates them as a social group.

In the excerpt below, the authors examine an interpretative repertoire they call "The container/the scientist." Here, the psychologist's emotions are seen as needing to be suppressed:

When clients spoke about difficult things in a matter of fact tone devoid of emotional expression, some practitioners saw this as an example of masking or as related to certain diagnoses. ... The position of the container is exclusively available to the psychologist, and it is partly what demarcates the power differentials inherent in the therapeutic relationship. Interestingly, although the position of the container was positively endorsed, the position of the scientist, also central to an interpretative repertoire of emotion suppression, was formulated as a more troubled identity by this sample. (2020, p. 233)

The scientist position was constructed as something to be resisted, unsatisfying for the psychologist and alienating for the client, who does not want the scientist with a tick sheet, standardised responses, and dispassionate gaze. This reflects a dilemma endemic in clinical psychology, a caring profession that ascribes to the authority of science in order to be considered a legitimate agent of social change. It is possible that the container is a repackaging of the subject position of the scientist to accommodate modern therapy, which emphasises the importance of the therapeutic relationship. (2020, p. 234)

van der Merwe and Wetherell go on to consider other interpretative repertoires including the "therapist as human"

(where their emotions are viewed as natural, authentic, and not needing to be suppressed). The role played by therapeutic modalities is acknowledged when recognizing that the *human repertoire* is seen most commonly in humanistic, client-centred therapies. They also acknowledge the limitations of drawing on participants who are psychologists in New Zealand. It is important not to assume the practice of psychology and therapy in that country is transferable to others.

Following the excerpt above, they critically interrogate how that language is enacted and the effects of it both in terms of power in the therapeutic relationship and in terms of how the profession as a whole is constructed. In particular, the authors argue how psychologists “model” a way of emoting which carries moral judgement and how “psychologists' emotional self-discipline is central to acting as effective disciplinary agents” (2020, p. 241). The authors are not saying that therapists are like scientists; instead, they are exploring how “emotion work” is performed and how it serves specific ends with social consequences.

I consider the overall paper a good example of discourse analysis as the authors pull out implicit metaphorical and cultural meanings in highlighting the interpretative repertoires. There is in-depth critical exploration including about the “ideological dilemmas” that confront therapists more broadly which demonstrates the professional relevance of their paper.

While the authors take pains to acknowledge that emotion construction is enacted differently across different therapeutic modalities, therapist-readers may take issue with the characterizations and how they are themselves being “positioned.” There is an ethical issue here to consider. It might have been helpful if there had been greater acknowledgement of how readers might themselves feel objectified by being viewed through such a critical, impersonal lens.

However, some relational ethics have been acknowledged in the authors' critical reflexivity regarding the potential power relationship between researcher and participants. Here the first author states she was the interviewer and also a trainee completing her doctorate. She notes that she was of a similar age and social background to the participants, but the participants had greater expertise. These factors, she recognises, may have helped the research discussions, and reduced any power differential, but also perhaps influenced their accounts to “place more stress on sanctioned affect” (2020, p. 231).

The article is published in an applied psychology journal where readers cannot be assumed to be well versed in discourse analytic writing. It is possible they would find the discursive jargon and theoretical/academic style of writing hard to relate to or follow. That said, the authors are nicely explicit about their epistemological frame and assumptions, and they are clear about straddling constructivist-interpretivist and feminist-poststructural epistemological stances. Importantly, they note that their version of discourse analysis interrogated the participants' accounts of how they were presenting the

work they do rather than treating the words as truthful, neutral descriptions (i.e., they offer a more relativist rather than realist account).

Accounting for their data collection procedures, they note that the four focus groups and individual follow up interviews were conducted as collaborative “conversational encounters” with both interviewer and the participants constructing meanings (2020, p. 231). In other words, this was an extensive study offering space for layered, in-depth analyses. The fact that the publishing journal allowed extra word space for discussion and reflexivity helps the researchers demonstrate the study's quality.

The utility of this research is shown in the recognition of how psychologists enact their “disciplinary power” through their emotion self-management. The authors recommend therapists reflexively consider their sets of practices about emoting (or not) within the therapeutic relationship as these have consequences which position both the client and therapy in significant ways.

*I am aware that discourse analysis is infrequently used in the therapy field (though its use is growing). Would I have been better advised to evaluate a more commonly applied methodology like grounded theory?*

*I wanted to offer a contrast and show what was possible using a different paradigm. I also wanted to get researchers/readers to think more critically about the impact of the social world. There is a danger that psychotherapy researchers get stuck in studying individuals' feelings. I own that I am making a strategic political move by elaborating the discursive approach which problematizes the idea of “feelings” and foregrounds the relevance of culture (and ideology and power).*

*I remain aware that readers may feel short-changed by my highly selective focus missing out grounded theory,*



*ethnography, action research and so on. My exemplars are arbitrary. I remind myself that the point is not to be representative of the field (the positivist imperative) but to illustrate and model possibilities for critical thinking.*

*All too aware of constraining word count, I am content to leave it here.*

accounts that enable dialogue, imagination, and growth, is truly a matter for celebration. However, word count constraints in most academic journals force researchers to represent their research in incomplete ways resulting in bland, superficial accounts. This makes it all the more important to work at crafting our articles and writing well and not being overly wordy. It's also important to remember that we can give voice to our qualitative research across several journal articles while fostering a critical (and cultural) humility about the limits of what the research offers.

Limitations aside, qualitative research remains a fascinating and intimate journey of exploration – one that has the potential to be inspiring and transformative, for our participants, for ourselves and potentially for others more widely.

## Conclusion

All research methodologies have strengths and limitations regarding what they highlight and miss. The fact that qualitative research attempts to capture ambiguities involved in experience and variabilities of the socio-cultural world adds the impossibility of the task.

Evaluations of research should consider both methodology and findings. As Tracy (2010) acknowledges, there is a distinction needed between the *means* (methods and processes) of research and its *ends* (the article and its outcomes). I have highlighted the importance of engaging criteria related to the aims of the chosen methodology and not importing external criteria. Criteria employed need to be “fit for purpose” rather than imposing arbitrary external standards.

With “Good” qualitative research, methodology and the data gathering/analysis methods need to cohere demonstrating methodological and ethical integrity. Then findings need to be clearly expressed, contextualized, ideally brought to life and/or evidenced by supporting quotations (from participants and/or literary sources). The research needs and shows its value and utility in terms of being a clear, informative and/or compelling account that offers new insight and understanding. Good research also *touches* us.

Even the process of doing the research can be impactful. Fred Wertz (2011, p. 135) makes this point when he talks about his descriptive phenomenological approach:

I experience research as a form of *love* in which I immerse myself in other people's lives. In analyzing protocols, I am often surprised and as I reflect more carefully, I gain deeper understanding and feeling of intimacy with human beings. I resonate with the dark sides of existence, and I am drawn to the precious value and dignity of real persons.

Qualitative researchers' sincere, hard-fought efforts to provide in-depth, meticulous, thoughtful, and respectfully reflexive

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