

# Big Tent Criteria for Qualitative Quality

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## Why do we need criteria for qualitative research?

Values for quality, like all social knowledge, are ever-changing and situated within local disciplinary contexts and current scholarly conversations. As such, it is important to regularly dialogue about what makes for good qualitative research. Whereas the quantitative community has well-established research aims for validity, reliability, generalizability, and objectivity, the qualitative methodological landscape possesses a large variety of concepts and discussions around quality—and even questions whether we really need criteria at all. This landscape illustrates the creative complexity associated with the localized, contextual work of qualitative research. However, there is also great value and need for more standardized criteria. As scholars continue to develop the wide and varied body of research with a qualitative methodology and focus, the establishment and proliferation of widely accepted rules, norms, and guidelines such as those presented in the big-tent model described herein, creates standards by which scholars from a variety of paradigms, backgrounds, and communities can consider and evaluate qualitative research with common understanding and acknowledgment.

A common language of best practices provides qualitative scholars the option to frame their work, if desired, as systematic and structured. Such criteria are also helpful for researchers who firmly align themselves within a specific theoretical or methodological community. Rules and guidelines help promising and proven qualitative scholars to continue learning, practicing, and perfecting their craft. However, many students, scholars, and even high-ranking decision-makers in powerful governmental, funding, and institutional review board positions encounter qualitative projects without knowing the standards and guidelines by which this kind of work can and should be evaluated. The criteria outlined here are useful in conveying the multifaceted approach to evaluating and assessing the quality of qualitative work for those who are currently unfamiliar with this line of research, while also providing a path to expertise for new and continuing qualitative researchers.

This entry is based on Tracy's (2010) "Eight 'big-tent' criteria for excellent qualitative research" published in *Qualitative Inquiry* and elaborated in her book on qualitative research methods (Tracy, 2013). The model of quality has had significant impact, with the original article (at time of writing) cited over 1300 times in a variety of qualitative research method books, syntheses on research quality, commentary on grounded

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theory approaches, and qualitative studies. In short, the model serves as a benchmark for demonstration of credibility, rigor, and other criteria outlined here.

Although there are a number of frameworks for qualitative quality, this one has advantages in terms of being parsimonious and promoting dialogue amongst qualitative scholars from different paradigms. It achieves these qualities by providing a conceptualization that differentiates between end goals of qualitative research (universal hallmarks of quality) and the myriad practices and variant methods, or means, that a researcher can choose from in order to achieve these goals. This distinction of research “means” and “ends” provides an expansive or “big tent” (Denzin, 2008) structure for quality while still promoting complex differences in paradigmatic practices. Differentiating between means and ends also helps researchers to see how work emanating from different paradigms may engage similar practices. For example, both postmodern and postpositivist qualitative researchers may engage in a similar practice of collecting a wide range of different kinds of data from different sources. Nonetheless, they may call this practice different things (e.g., crystallization versus triangulation), and do the process for different goals (to show how data is fractured versus to show its alignment). Nonetheless, these practices are similar in that they are used to enrich the quality of a research project, even if for different reasons (postmodernist scholars may engage in crystallization to add depth and complexity while postpositivists may engage in triangulation to validate findings).

## Dimensions of the model

As delineated in this model, high-quality qualitative research is marked by: (1) worthy topic, (2) rich rigor, (3) sincerity, (4) credibility, (5) resonance, (6) significant contribution, (7) ethics, and (8) meaningful coherence (see Table 1). Each criterion of quality can be approached via a variety of means, paths, or crafts—the combination of which depends on the specific researcher, context, theoretical affiliation, and project.

### *Worthy topic*

A worthy topic is one that is relevant, timely, significant, and compelling. Such a topic may develop importance over time within a specific discipline or be specifically contracted for further study by institutions or agencies. A phronetic approach to qualitative research (Tracy, 2013) suggests that contextual priorities are integral when developing a project; as such, the recruitment of a researcher in a consultant-type role represents one way that a topic’s worthiness can be established by a third party, as when studies or reports are commissioned by institutions. The focus of research can also occur suddenly through shifts in a researcher’s personal or societal landscape, such as the surge of patriotism and jingoism in the wake of September 11, or an uptick in political rhetoric around the time of presidential elections.

Shallow forays in the interest of popular, convenient, or opportunistic pursuits are generally not considered to be worthy topics. Such recreational research must demonstrate larger significance, relevance, and application to the scholarly community to be

**Table 1** Summary of the eight big-tent criteria for excellent qualitative research.

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<i>Criteria for quality (end goal)</i>	<i>Various means, practices and methods through which to achieve</i>
Worthy topic	The topic of the research is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Relevant</li><li>• Timely</li><li>• Significant</li><li>• Interesting</li></ul>
Rich rigor	The study uses a sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Set of theoretical constructs</li><li>• Data and time in the field</li><li>• Sample(s)</li><li>• Context(s)</li><li>• Data collection and analysis processes</li></ul>
Sincerity	The study is characterized by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s)</li><li>• Transparency about the methods and challenges</li></ul>
Credibility	The research is marked by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (non-textual) knowledge and showing rather than telling</li><li>• Triangulation or crystallization</li><li>• Multivocality</li><li>• Member reflections</li></ul>
Resonance	The research influences, impacts, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Aesthetic, evocative representation</li><li>• Naturalistic generalizations</li><li>• Transferable findings</li></ul>
Significant contribution	The research provides a significant contribution: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conceptually/theoretically</li><li>• Practically</li><li>• Morally</li><li>• Methodologically</li><li>• Heuristically</li></ul>
Ethics	The research considers <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Procedural ethics (such as human subjects)</li><li>• Situational and culturally specific ethics</li><li>• Relational ethics</li><li>• Exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research)</li></ul>

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**Table 1** (Continued)

<i>Criteria for quality (end goal)</i>	<i>Various means, practices and methods through which to achieve</i>
Meaningful coherence	<p>The study</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Achieves what it purports to be about</li> <li>● Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals.</li> <li>● Meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/ foci, findings, and interpretations with each other</li> </ul>

Source: Tracy, 2010. Republished with permission of SAGE.

considered worthy. One path to worthiness is for a topic to challenge taken for granted theoretical, practical, and/or methodological assumptions on the part of the researcher or research community, therefore catalyzing new contributions and understandings of the social world. Such a topic might reveal an aspect of life that has been misunderstood or overlooked, or examine a commonly accepted practice in a new, novel way. Research that is counterintuitive, questions taken for granted assumptions, or challenges well-accepted ideas is often worthwhile, interesting, and points out surprises that shake readers from their common-sense assumptions and practices. Thus, a topic must be worthy of study, but the researcher should also be prepared to make a significant contribution to the topic itself. In short, audiences should think, “That’s interesting,” rather than, “That’s obvious” (Davis, 1971).

### *Rich rigor*

In contrast to quantitative research that is often appreciated for its precision, high-quality qualitative research is marked by a rich complexity of abundant descriptions and rich explanations. In qualitative research, scholars demonstrate rigor through careful attention to detail, methodological thoroughness, precision of evaluation, and the generation of requisite variety in regard to data richness and complexity. Requisite variety refers to the need for a tool or instrument to be at least as complex, flexible, and multifaceted as the concept, interaction, situation, or actors being studied. As such, qualitative research is benefitted by a researcher who is widely read, and provides clarity about the different concepts and data by which she or he arrived at findings and assertions.

The demonstration of rigor often occurs in the methodology section of research reports through the description of data collection and analysis. In this section, researchers detail the amount of data collected, the duration of time spent in the field, and the different kinds of data contributing to the study. It is important to note, however, that the demonstration and evidence of rigor manifests in varying degrees, depending on the topic under study. If the phenomenon in question is a rare or unique occurrence, there may be limited access, permissibility, or availability of data upon which to base an analysis. Two recent articles investigating male executives’ conceptualizations of work–life balance (Tracy & Rivera, 2010) and male professors’ perceptions of

sexual harassment (Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2008) exemplify new or rare data which are exempt from traditional notions of rigor due not only to the uniqueness of the topic under study, but also to the dearth of existing research examining these two populations in conjunction with the area of study. The question of how much data is appropriate to answer a given research question varies with each study and each question asked. There is no perfect amount of time in the field that will guarantee rigor; the amount of data necessary is that which provide for and substantiate meaningful and significant claims.

In terms of data analysis, researchers must account for their translation of raw data into field notes, the organization of their data, and the analysis process by which they made claims and conclusions. Ways to account for rigorous analysis practices may include disclosing the number of pages of typed field notes and/or interview transcriptions which contributed to analysis, the time gap between fieldwork and the development of field notes, the number and length of interviews, the appropriateness and breadth of the interview sample given the goals of the study, and transparency regarding the process of sorting, choosing, and organizing the data.

### *Sincerity*

Qualitative researchers achieve sincerity through self-reflexivity, vulnerability, honesty, and transparency. The use of the term sincerity is not meant to connote a single, authentic reality or truth, but is instead meant to convey honesty about the researcher's background and biases, and the ways in which these factors might play a role in the execution of data collection and analysis.

Self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher is evidenced by the sharing of motivations, strengths, and shortcomings for the study. Researchers can practice self-reflexivity even before stepping into the field through being introspective, assessing their own biases and motivations, and asking whether they are well suited to examine their chosen sites or topics at this time. Awareness of and authenticity about one's own identity and role within the research context is a central component of a researcher's sincerity. This reflexivity is evidenced by researchers' shared accounts of members' reactions to their participation in the site, using the first person, "I," to remind readers of the researcher's presence, influence, and role within the research context, and balancing these personal accounts with claims made from the data. Ethnographers should report their own voice in relation to others and explicate *how* they claim to know what they know.

In addition to being honest and vulnerable through self-reflexivity, another practice of sincerity is transparency. Researchers must be transparent about how they accessed the context of the study, their level of participation and immersion, field note practices, and level of detail in transcription. Truthfulness and transparency about mistakes made in the access or data collection process, the extent to which those mistakes impacted data collection and analysis, and whether surprises were addressed and resolved along the way all contribute to the sincerity of a researcher and the final report. Transparent research is marked by disclosure of the study's challenges, methods of funding, unexpected twists and turns, and revelation of the ways research foci transformed over time. Transparent researchers give credit where it is due in terms

of author order and acknowledgments to participants, funding sources, research assistants, and supportive colleagues.

### *Credibility*

In quantitative research, credibility is achieved through reliability, replicability, consistency, and accuracy of a study's findings. These are unsuitable yardsticks for quality in qualitative research. Qualitative researchers attain credibility through the use of thick description, crystallization of data, evidence of multivocality (providing opportunities for voice from a range of stakeholders), and engaging in member reflections with participants. These four practices contribute to the dependability and trustworthiness of a researcher, as well as the expression of an empirical reality that is plausible or seems true and accurate. Credibility is significant in creating confidence that people can act upon data and findings to make decisions in their own lives, work, and families, or in future research settings.

One of the most important means for achieving credibility in qualitative research is thick description (Geertz, 1973). Thick description contributes to credibility through extensive accounts, portrayals, and depictions of interactions and communicative processes as they occur in the field. In order to illustrate data's complexity, researchers are advised to *show*, meaning that they provide enough detail that readers may come to their own conclusion about the scene. This is contrasted from the author *telling* the reader what to think. Whereas sincerity is evidenced by a researcher's awareness and explication of inward motivations and thought processes, the outward focus of thick description provides researchers a detailed account upon which to base their claims as evidenced by observed interactions occurring in context.

Crystallization and triangulation are other practices that can result in credibility. Crystallization (Ellingson, 2008) and triangulation entail the inclusion of multiple data points, sources, and researcher points of view. Just as crystals have several facets that comprise their overall shape, analyses about research sites can gain credibility by including multiple kinds of data, people, and ways of understanding the world. These practices encourage researchers to gather multiple types of data and employ various methods, multiple researchers, and numerous theoretical frameworks. Doing so can help solidify findings, but also open up the scene in a more complex, in-depth, but still thoroughly partial, manner.

Closely aligned with the notion of crystallization, and showing rather than telling, is multivocality. Multivocality represents the inclusion of multiple voices evident within the research context. In addition to providing an empathic understanding, attending to multivocality provides space for a variety of opinions. Qualitative researchers do not put words in members' mouths, but rather attend to viewpoints that diverge with those of the majority or with the author. By understanding how different groups may understand the same communication phenomenon in different ways, researchers can maintain credibility by demonstrating to their readers that due diligence has been paid to the multiple interpretations of a given communication interaction.

Lastly, member reflections, wherein researchers share preliminary findings with participants and make note of reactions to themes and issues that have emerged in

the analysis, are linked to qualitative credibility. Member reflections allow researchers to gauge the impact and relevance of their findings and use participant impressions to inform continued data collection. Member reflections also allow for sharing and dialoguing with participants about the study's findings, and providing opportunities for questions, critique, feedback, affirmation, and even collaboration. Member reflections also help the researcher learn whether members find the research comprehensible and meaningful. Member reflections are differentiated in this model from "member checks" which are focused on ensuring that participants agree with the data and emerging themes. Member reflections can be useful whether or not participants agree.

### *Resonance*

Resonance is the extent to which a text meaningfully impacts an audience such that a reader can make connections between the themes or findings in the study at hand, and generalize those trends to his or her own life or other areas of research. This kind of naturalistic generalization is qualitatively different from a more formal generalization set forth by quantitative studies. Formal understandings of generalizability are usually unhelpful and not applicable for qualitative research. This is because statistical generalizations require random representational samples using data that is isolated from any particular context or situation. In contrast, qualitative research engages in-depth studies that generally produce historically and culturally situated knowledge. Through the process of naturalistic generalizations, readers make choices based on their own intuitive understanding of the scene, rather than feeling as though the research report is instructing them what to do. Rather than using their findings to predict, generalize, and control future interactions and contexts, qualitative researchers conduct in-depth, situated analyses of contexts, rhetorical situations, and embodied experiences in such a way that readers can appreciate the study's findings and then intuitively apply, or transfer, those findings to their own situations.

Resonance in qualitative research can be achieved through aesthetic merit, evocative writing, and formal generalizations as well as transferability. Not every qualitative study must achieve resonance in the same way, but all high-quality qualitative reports impact stakeholders beyond the researcher or research team. The way the qualitative report is written or presented is significantly intertwined with its content, meaning that the construction of the text has the potential to aesthetically affect its readers. Certainly, some writers' aesthetic merit, quality of description, and caliber of writing make transferability easier for their readers than others. Through his or her thick description, a researcher paints a picture of how life unfolds in a given context or how a concept can be better understood. However, it is eventually up to the reader to make connections between the researcher's findings and familiar contexts germane to his or her own life experience.

### *Significant contribution*

The significance of a study is largely judged by whether or not the findings extend, transform, or complicate existing bodies of knowledge, theories, or practices in new,

important, and insightful ways. Scholars want to craft their essays so as to avoid having their readers ask questions like “So what?” and “Don’t we know this already?” Thus, it is easy to see how the significant contribution of a study is related to the worthiness of its topic. It is not enough to know that the topic is worthy of study; a researcher must also make a valuable contribution to that area of study for the research to be deemed significant.

Qualitative research can be significant in four different domains: theoretical, heuristic, methodological, and practical. Depending on the topic under study, one or more of these kinds of contributions may be held in higher esteem by the scholarly community. A theoretical contribution might extend, build, or critique existing theory, or apply a given theory in a new, novel way as an analytical framework. For instance, a researcher might take the concept of burnout—which emerged in research with human service workers—and see how it manifests among business professionals. However, theoretical significance usually requires that we go beyond mere (re)application of existing theory. Rather, research that builds theory extends or problematizes current theoretical assumptions. Such contributions offer new and unique understandings that emerge from the data analysis—conceptualizations that help explain social life in unique ways, and may be transferred to other contexts.

A heuristic contribution might offer new information on a particular topic or communicative phenomenon in a new context or among unique populations, moving people to further explore, research, or act upon the research in the future. Researchers can increase heuristic significance by providing readers with substantive and interesting suggestions for future research. Research is also heuristic when it influences a variety of audiences—such as policy-makers, research participants, or the lay public—to engage in action or change. This overlaps with practical significance.

Practical contributions help people engage in practices and behaviors in a new, improved, or more informed manner, given the findings of the study. Such contributions empower participants to see the world in new ways, or help shed light on, transform, or valuably reframe a problem.

Methodological contributions may take the form of a distinctive approach to applying or extending methods of inquiry, either in regard to a new context, site, or concept. A research project that yields unsurprising theoretical findings may nonetheless provide a significant contribution by introducing and explicating a new methodological approach. For instance, methodological significance could emerge from the qualitative study of a concept that has previously been examined solely quantitatively or experimentally. In this way, methodological contributions can lead to new kinds of theoretical insights as a result of investigating and applying a theory in a new way.

### *Ethics*

Ethical qualitative research can be categorized in four ways. The first type is procedural ethics, which are those that fulfill bureaucratic standards often set forth by an institutional review board and considered to be universal or required to protect participants against unnecessary risk from their involvement in the study. Procedural

ethics encompass the importance of accuracy and avoiding fabrication, fraud, omission, and contrivance. These standards include participants' rights to confidentiality, anonymity, and the protection of participants' identity and privacy.

Situational ethics refer to a researcher's in-the-moment enactment of upholding rules and standards of ethical behavior, such as choosing when and where to audio- or video-record participants, as well as which stories to include in an article and assessing if the data's disclosure might negatively impact participants. A situational ethic assumes that each research study is different, and that researchers must repeatedly reflect upon, critique, and question their ethical decisions. There are no automatic good choices, but a situational ethic asks that researchers constantly reflect on their methods and sensibly consider which data are worth exposing.

Relational ethics encourage researchers to be aware of the impact they have on people within the research site, and to treat participants with dignity, acknowledging them as people with values, voices, and beliefs, rather than merely as subjects of observation. Relational ethics (Ellis, 2007) involve an ethical self-consciousness in which researchers are mindful of their character, actions, and consequences upon others. Qualitative researchers must consider the impact of their study, its implications, and their role in the research site, throughout their inquiry. Questions to consider include: How are you being with your participants? Are you acting kindly and empathetically?

Lastly, exiting ethics refer to the care and thoughtfulness of how researchers leave the site and share their results with the scholarly community. Certainly, researchers never have full control over how their work will be read, understood, and used. However, they can consider how best to present the research so as to avoid unjust or unintended consequences for their participants, particularly those who may be members of marginalized populations.

### *Meaningful coherence*

Meaningful coherence refers to the overall consistency, soundness, and rationality of a study. The literature reviewed in a study should give rise to and establish a fitting context for related research questions. The research questions, in turn, should be suitably addressed by appropriate methods that fit the paradigmatic and research alliances. The data, stories, or findings should fit with the literature and research questions. The goals of the intended study are achieved in the analysis, and should include implications that speak to issues, questions, concerns, or controversies identified in the literature review. Meaningful coherence is also about the logical and intuitive connection of various arguments or concepts in a single study. When a piece of research has meaningful coherence, each section of the study—the introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, conclusions, and implications (or other sections)—flows together in a way that is both meaningful and coherent for the reader. Meaningfully coherent studies achieve their stated purpose, accomplish what they say they are about, use methods that partner appropriately with the espoused theories and paradigms, and connect current literature with the research foci, methods, and findings.

SEE ALSO: Content Analysis, Qualitative; Crystallization; Field Notes; Fieldwork; Interpretive Research; Narrative Ethics; Theoretical Saturation; Voice/Multivocality

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## Further reading

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