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Dawn O. Braithwaite

University of Nebraska–Lincoln, dbraithwaite1@unl.edu

Julia Moore

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, jmoore@huskers.unl.edu

Jenna Stephenson Abetz

College of Charleston

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Braithwaite, Dawn O.; Moore, Julia; and Abetz, Jenna Stephenson, "“I need numbers before I will buy it”: Reading and writing qualitative scholarship on close relationships" (2014). *Papers in Communication Studies*. 49.
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Published in *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 31:4 (2014), pp. 490–496; doi: 10.1177/0265407514524131
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Published online February 25, 2014. <http://spr.sagepub.com/content/31/4/490>

“I need numbers before I will buy it”: Reading and writing qualitative scholarship on close relationships

Dawn O. Braithwaite,¹ Julia Moore,¹
and Jenna Stephenson Abetz²

1. University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, USA

2. College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA

Corresponding author — Dawn O. Braithwaite, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 430 Oldfather Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588, USA. Email: dbraithwaite@unl.edu

Abstract

The authors highlight important contributions of qualitative research for the study of close relationships, arguing for greater representation of this scholarship in the journals. Four challenges experienced by interpretive researchers trying to publish in *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* and close relationship journals are discussed.

Keywords: Interpretive scholarship, qualitative methods, qualitative validity

It is our strong belief that each research paradigm has important contributions to make to the study of close relationships as they help scholars answer different types of questions. In the present essay, we center our focus on research from the interpretive paradigm, as this represents the greatest amount of scholarship, outside of post-positivist work, published in the field of close relationships (see Braithwaite & Baxter, 2008; Stamp & Shue, 2013). We fully recognize the breadth of scholars who engage qualitative data and believe the study of close relationships will be stronger when the contributions of these scholars are fully realized.

Readers of this forum in *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships (JSPR)* might wonder why we need to give special treatment to qualitative methods in 2014. Although interpretive scholarship has become more common in *JSPR* and other journals publishing close relationships research, growth has not been without struggle for those trying to publish the work, or for some colleagues who participate in the peer review process. Although interpretive scholars have come a long way, we seek greater representation of this scholarship in the close relationships field and argue that it is incumbent on close relationship scholars to understand how to read and review this work expertly and fairly.

The development of the interdisciplinary study of close relationships was rooted in the goal of generating “a science of relationships” (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983, p. 7). In 2000, Hendrick and Hendrick’s *Close Relationships* volume included a chapter on qualitative methods and authors Allen and Walker argued for contributions of qualitative research to the study of close relationships while simultaneously decrying the lack of the scholarship in top journals, including *JSPR*. In the same volume, Berscheid overviewed the history and state of close relationships research, tracing it back to Comte’s positivist theory of science. Berscheid argued that “the most consistent theme throughout Comte’s writings was not his insistence on quantification; instead it was his belief that the aim of the pursuit of knowledge ... [was] to improve society and the human condition” (2000, p. xvi). Although qualitative research has been a part of the interdisciplinary field of close relationships for some time, it has often been a poorer cousin in the disciplines that comprise the field of close relationships (Braithwaite, in press). The time has passed for qualitative scholarship to be considered novel or in need of establishing its contributions.

Just as referencing “quantitative methods” would include a wide variety of positivist and post-positivist methods, scholarship appearing under the category of “qualitative methods” spans a continuum of interpretive and critical research (Ellingson, 2011; Tracy, 2013). For this reason, we find it more useful to talk about *qualitative* as referencing a type of data, which are then interpreted or analyzed differently by scholars from post-positivist, interpretive, and critical paradigms. For example, the first author’s research team interviewed young adult stepchildren and collected narratives about the origin of their stepfamilies. In one analysis, the research team employed a post-positivist lens to code narratives by story type and correlated these types with family satisfaction (Koenig Kellas et al., 2014). We also undertook an interpretive analysis of the remarriage event from the perspective of stepchildren, finding it to be largely an empty ritual (Baxter et al., 2009). We could take a critical turn to these data as well by examining the underlying ideologies and power structures within stepfamilies’ talk. Thus, qualitative methods are best conceptualized as points on a paradigmatic continuum (Ellingson, 2011), each with its own contributions.

Contributions of qualitative/interpretive research

Qualitative methods are well suited to study close relationship forms, processes, and meanings (Allen & Walker, 2000), as scholars seek to understand how individuals, relational partners, families, and others in close relationships per-

ceive, understand, experience, enact, and negotiate their relational worlds (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In short, scholars working in the interpretive paradigm seek to “understand what action means to people ... to render human action intelligible” (Baxter & Babbie, 2004, p. 59) and to understand a given phenomenon from the participants’ points of view (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interpretive researchers embrace the subjectivity of human experience, finding interest in local groundedness and naturally occurring events within particular social and cultural contexts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles et al., 2014; Tracy, 2013).

Interpretive scholars engage in empirical observation and thick description of “the flow of social discourse” (Geertz, 1973, p. 20). Interpretive research functions as both art and science (Ellingson, 2011; Manning & Kunkel, 2014) as these scholars “are drawn to the fluid, evolving, and dynamic nature of this approach” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 13). Interpretive scholarship is particularly well suited to study close relationships as the methods are themselves relational; data are often gathered in interviews or interactions with the goal of “learning what it feels like” to be in a given relational context or experience (Tracy, 2013, p. 6).

Writing, reading, and evaluating interpretive research

It is our contention that scholars will be able to competently consume and discover value in interpretive research *only* when that work is judged on its own merits. This should be the baseline criterion for scholarship coming out of *any* research tradition. Yet it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find a close relationships scholar working in the interpretive paradigm, who has not encountered reviewers who do not accept qualitative scholarship or understand how to evaluate it, especially research that does not progress or read like more traditional social science scholarship (Tracy, 2012). In the end, *all* scholars bear the responsibility to be well educated and very clear on what their paradigm does and does not support regarding their research approaches and/or arguments. We discuss four challenges experienced by qualitative researchers trying to publish in *JSPR* and close relationships journals and organize the discussion around comments from reviewers.

“Do the empirical study.” First, it is not unusual for reviewers representing social science journals like *JSPR* to praise a qualitative researcher for richness and insights of his or her findings, followed by the mandate to now “do the empirical study” (e.g., an experimental or correlational project) before the reviewer would recommend publication. In this case, clearly “empirical” has been equated with “quantitative.” However, the term empirical has been used in the academic vernacular, it does not refer to a method of analysis but rather to observation (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The suggestion to do the empirical study is, for the qualitative researcher, the tip-off that the reader is not familiar with, or comfortable with, the paradigmatic assumptions and standards by which to judge their scholarship in and of itself. Lack of comfort or agreement does not render qualitative scholarship unempirical nor, as Tracy (2012) suggested, must the interpretive scholarship mirror scholarship in the post-positivist paradigm to be accepted.

"I need numbers before I will buy it." Second, the demand for numbers appears when reviewers seek quantitative analyses of the researcher's data in order for them to consider the research valid. Thankfully, a comment as bald on record as the one above is rarer than it once was, but it still appears. In some ways having a reviewer make the statement above is easier to respond to than another comment we've received, "*It is just descriptive.*" In this case, the scholar is praised for his or her efforts, interest, and insight, but the research is critiqued for its inability to test relationships among variables. This is frustrating to the interpretive scholar as this indicates that the research is judged by what it is *not* rather than what it *is*.

Clearly and proficiently articulating one's rationale and approach to understanding data are responsibilities of all researchers. However, the need to justify centering the research in the chosen paradigm is an added burden that quantitative scholars do not share at present. Qualitative scholars bear a burden of educating readers and arguing for contributions of the approach (e.g., see Braithwaite et al., 2010; Oswald, 2000). While we might argue it should not be necessary, at least in the short term, qualitative researchers are wise to help readers understand how to evaluate the scholarship fairly.

While description of methods in a qualitative research report is not tied to facilitating replication, qualitative scholars should include ample detail to help readers understand and draw "warranted conclusions" in order to "see how key concepts emerged over time, which variables appeared and disappeared, and which categories led to important insights" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 334; also see Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2010 as an excellent example). Detail and clarity are perhaps more important for qualitative scholars as there is no universal agreement about the terminology to describe common procedures at present (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

"Where are your reliability scores?" Third, if the request for numbers is not an outright expectation for the second "real"/empirical study, most often it signals a desire for intercoder reliability scores. This is another reason to make the distinction between qualitative *data* and interpretive *analysis*. Certainly, researchers may analyze qualitative data by developing a coding book, training coders, and assessing intercoder reliability to describe relationships between variables or argue for validity to answer certain research questions. However, this is not the goal of the interpretive researcher who may analyze data with a research team and or otherwise engage in a discursive process of coming to agreement on the codes as did Terrion (2012) in her study of recover capital of students experiencing addiction. Hannah and Lautsch (2011) provide a thoughtful discussion of challenges of counting for qualitative researchers, not the least of which are pitfalls of trying to argue from a small "sample" as do most interpretivists.

We do understand the assumptions some readers may make when they see the term "coding," and how this may be conflated with counting. For the interpretive scholar, the meaning is quite different and coding involves "interacting with the data (analysis) using techniques such as asking questions about the data, making comparisons between data ... deriving concepts to stand for those data, then developing those concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 66). One way to keep the distinction clearer is to avoid using the

term coding in interpretive analysis or at least to define the interpretive approach taken in an effort to differentiate between data that are analyzed quantitatively and those analyzed interpretively. Braun and Clarke (2006) also recommend that interpretive scholars stress the active role of the researcher in identifying and developing themes.

"How do you know you found anything?" Fourth, qualitative researchers need to address issues of validity of their findings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Kvale and Brinkmann explained, "Validation is based on a logic of uncertainty and of qualitative probability, where it is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations and to arbitrate between them" (2009, p. 253). There are a number of approaches for addressing validity in the literature (e.g., Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Miles et al., 2014; Suter, 2009), and interpretive scholars should engage best practices and describe them completely in the research report. Many qualitative researchers engage in member checking or member validation, asking participants or other members of that particular community to reflect on the results of the study and recognize them as representative of their own experience, as exemplified in Oswald's (2000) description of the experience of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender family members attending heterosexual weddings. Interpretive scholars are well served by testing their findings via peer debriefing (e.g., Baxter & Babbie, 2004) or what we refer to in our research community as data conferencing, where researchers present results to colleagues outside of the project with expertise in the method, theory, and/or concepts or context under study. These scholars function to question and check the procedures and results, helping the researchers refine their work as warranted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2014).

Relatedly, interpretive scholars often receive queries about between-group differences in their findings. For example, "Your results are very interesting, but what about if this happened in a first marriage versus a second marriage?" or "What about if these were domestic rather than international adoptees?" The good news is these questions indicate the topic and findings are evocative. However, trying to address between-group differences will not serve the goals of interpretive scholarship and opens the work to critique.

The interpretive scholar will maximize the contribution of his or her work by framing findings within the context of the data collected (e.g., Oswald, 2000). It is essential to keep this perspective explicit in the research report and clearly frame the claims one can make from these data. Interpretive scholarship derives contextualized conclusions concerning knowledge and experiences that are historically and culturally situated (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Tracy, 2013). This does not make interpretive work less important or valuable, just true to the data.

While we have described several challenges interpretive scholars face when publishing in close relationship journals, we do recognize progress. We encourage authors, editors, and reviewers of our flagship close relationship journals to actively ensure that positive momentum continues. The complexity of close relationships warrants sound and thoughtful research from across disciplines and research traditions, welcoming diverse perspectives and voices to the table.

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