

✧ SCHOLARLY PAPER ✧

The good, the bad and the relative, part two: Goodness and the criterion problem in qualitative research

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The good, the bad, and the relative, part two: Goodness and the criterion problem in qualitative research

This (part two) paper finds 'the problem of the criterion' at the heart of disputes about what constitutes goodness in qualitative research, an ancient philosophic conundrum as to how best represent reality. Ways around the problem are considered, including conceiving criteria as open-ended 'lists', and 'enabling conditions'. Discussion principally concerns the impact of postmodernist thinking on the topic, and how qualitative researchers might usefully juxtapose the rationality of a modern world (in which notions such as reliability and validity are prized) with a mounting postmodern sensibility that acknowledges irrationality, fragmentation, and uncertainty. Part one of the paper traced efforts to define 'goodness' in qualitative research within various fields, including nursing. Disputes were found to centre on how the traditional concepts of reliability and validity related to qualitative research. In reviewing various sets of criteria of goodness, these concepts were consequently conceived as being championed, translated, exiled, redeemed, and surpassed.

Key words: criteria, goodness, postmodernism, qualitative research.

ANCESTRY OF THE CRITERION

Chisholm is quoted by Smith as stating that 'the problem of the criterion' is one of the most important and difficult problems of philosophy.¹ Smith further suggests that one has not seriously thought about the nature of inquiry 'until one has confronted the criteria issue'.¹ Positivism is home to the belief that reality exists 'out there' and that the job of science is to discover this reality. Classically, in

order to control and predict reality (the natural world) great precision is necessary on the part of the scientist to verify conclusions reached. To distinguish whether things are really as they appear, that is, whether science is doing its job, is largely a matter of applying a correct method.²

While positivism has long been overtaken by less purist assumptions (for example, 'reality exists but can never be fully apprehended . . . objectivity can only be approximated' the problem of the criterion persists. That is, what counts as evidence of good science? Or, what counts as 'true'? Criteria connote 'efforts to develop and test

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propositions in a language from which all perspective, bias, and so forth have been removed'³ and are closely aligned with the notion of a 'rigor' whose ancestry can similarly be traced to positivism and its problems. A 'properly done' study possesses rigor. This search for scientific certitude persists, even within the very different ontological, epistemological, and methodological positions of qualitative research. This is apparent in the deeply pervasive use of the terms 'rigor' and 'criteria' within qualitative research literature, whether in debate about the topic *per se*, or within research reports and theses, or within discussions and decisions of review panels and funding boards.

Importantly for this paper, once one has grasped the philosophic significance of the criterion problem, use of the term 'goodness' (or substitute terms such as rigor, quality, standards, guidelines, or principles) is not an escape from the problem. At most, it suggests an attempt to grapple more reflectively with the problem. Usage of the various terms is not consistent in the literature, as will be shown; nevertheless some associations can be made, and we return to these in conclusion. The key point at this juncture is that all the terms, whatever their usage, are directed (wittingly or unwittingly) towards solving the criterion problem.

CONTEMPLATING THE DEMISE OF CRITERIA

Moving beyond *criteriology*⁴ in terms of reliability and validity severs qualitative research from the tenets of positivism, a pleasing option for many, as shown in Part one of this paper. To move away from criteria *per se* is a vastly more complex enterprise. It could be argued that the prospect of a world (whether of research or other human endeavour) without reference points is analogous to being becalmed under leaden skies without a compass. Without an external guide of one form or another, how can we know what direction to take or, for that matter, what is good (or poor) qualitative research? Conversely, as Heshusius plainly puts it: 'If something is good, you know it. It is a mark of naivete to be dependent on a list of criteria to arrive at something you can trust. Such dependence is a regression into security seeking, a reverse kind of positivism. It is finding refuge once more in "method"'.⁵ To further confound the debate is the realisation that 'no criterion can ever be independent of our own construction of it'.⁵ Thus, the problem of the criterion is central to this discussion.

Criteria as open-ended lists

Smith describes one way around the criteria problem: conceiving criteria not as definite rules but as ever-evolving and open-ended 'lists'.¹ Such a conception allows for items (criteria) to be added or subtracted, according to the use of the list. Criteria are thus constantly modified through practice and become dialogical in nature. The most common criticism of this approach, according to Smith, is that its adherents are not really talking about criteria or even research, they '... have pushed non-foundationalism so far that they are enmeshed in a completely unacceptable relativism, one that reduces knowledge to the level of merely belief, opinion, and/or taste'.¹

Criteria as 'enabling conditions'

In a paper provocatively titled 'Farewell to *criteriology*', Schwandt makes a case for social science inquiry to be more accurately termed 'practical reasoning' or 'practical philosophy'.³ As such, the focus is away from 'theory-centered, value neutral, atomistic, disengaged' reason, towards democracy, at the heart of which lie five 'enabling conditions' to do with dialogue, a community of interpreters, rhetoric, conversation, and imagination.³ Schwandt also calls for a new vocabulary in which terms such as 'certainty' are not used; rather, the word 'adoption' suggests efforts to make something fit. Similarly, 'understanding' is advocated instead of 'knowledge' because of its greater versatility. Schwandt believes the biggest threat to his ideas is not relativism but cynicism, a 'disbelief in shared values'. The title of this paper is only sustainable on the basis of its author's strict definition of *criteriology*: 'the quest for permanent or stable criteria of rationality'.³ More critically, Schwandt's ideas could be construed as the criterion problem in disguise.

Inapplicability of criteria of goodness across qualitative traditions

A further dimension to the criterion problem is an assumption that qualitative inquiry comprises a homogeneous set of traditions that can be considered as one, for the purpose of determining quality. Atkinson argues against classification of various research approaches as qualitative: 'there is no single set of theoretical or methodological presuppositions to underpin a qualitative paradigm, nor is there an uncontested collection of methods and research exemplars'.⁶ While acknowledging there is some benefit in classification and simplification for teaching purposes, Atkinson maintains it is 'dangerously mis-

leading' to treat qualitative methods 'in all their variety' as paradigmatic. At best, any comprehensive listing of qualitative studies will reveal 'a collection of assumptions, methods, and kinds of data that share some broad family resemblances'. As he points out, 'the processes of classification and simplification frequently go hand in hand'.⁶

Engel and Kuzel similarly argue that there are conflicting discourses within the qualitative research tradition, and attempt to apply 'in principle' arguments to cover all cases that become too abstract to be useful.⁷ They state that 'criteria for judging the quality of work in various traditions needed to be particular to the approach and might be markedly different across approaches'.⁷ Beck⁸ goes further, claiming simplification within the same tradition can be misleading, taking as an example three proponents of phenomenology (Giorgi, Colaizzi and VanKaam), and showing how one cannot assume that similar criteria of rigor are applicable to each. These ideas are borne out by Lincoln who states that 'specific criteria might apply to specific kinds or classes of research' and (intriguingly) that it might be best to permit 'criteria to grow indigenously as a natural consequence of the inquiry effort'.⁴

The demise of criteria per se seems a long way off, despite efforts by some authors to recast the problem as a non-issue. Philosophical problems tend not to go away in a hurry, as Lincoln, in possibly her most philosophical paper on this topic, concludes: 'We are not ready either to close down the conversation or to say farewell to criteria quite yet'.⁴ Confounding the problem is the mounting realisation that it may not be possible to keep a qualitative tradition alive as a coherent whole. It seems our topic of goodness in qualitative research may be fragmenting as we write, posing a considerable pragmatic challenge for those required to make speedy judgements about the quality of qualitative work, such as members of human research ethics committees, funding bodies, and editorial review boards, as well as consumers and the designers of the research in the first place.

POSTMODERNIST THINKING AND DEBATES ABOUT GOODNESS

Trends in thinking discussed above parallel shifts in philosophical ideas about knowledge. Like it or not, as Giroux says:

... we have entered a new age, one that is marked by a crisis of power, patriarchy, authority, identity, and ethics. This new age has

*been described, for better or worse, by many theorists in a variety of disciplines as the age of postmodernism. It is a period torn between the ravages and benefits of modernism . . . we live in a time when a strong challenge is being waged against a modernist discourse in which knowledge is legitimized almost exclusively from a European model of culture and civilization.*⁹

The discourse to which LeCompte and Goetz¹⁰ ascribed in 1982 was decidedly modernist, as was that of their criterion-oriented followers. It was a discourse of the Enlightenment, of science and certainty, truth and objectivity. The appeal to grand narratives was widespread, as indeed it still is today; that is, that there is some fixed point of reference (such as a set of criteria) to which one can turn for deciding courses of action, importance, and worth.

The onset of a postmodern sensibility within many fields and disciplines is well captured by Bernstein when he speaks of a headiness or 'prevailing mood' which is difficult to pin down, and confusing, a sense that 'something is happening that radically calls into question entrenched ways of thinking, acting and feeling'.¹¹ Although postmodernism has multiple meanings (and indeed would be better termed postmodernisms on this account) philosophically speaking, it holds that 'the dualisms which continue to dominate Western thought are inadequate for understanding a world of multiple cause and effects interacting in complex and non-linear ways'.¹² The growing discomfort of some authors with the 'criteria' approach to determining goodness in qualitative research can be construed as directly related to these changing philosophical orientations. Take as an example Lincoln's views about positionality.⁴

Others, disillusioned with the principles of modernity, have feelings of frustration and futility about what, if anything, might take their place in the face of postmodernism being widely viewed as pessimistic and nihilistic. As Cobb says:

*Deconstruction as carried forward by the leading French thinkers, Derrida and Foucault, problematizes everything that the modern world has taken for granted. It undercuts every quest for certainty. It does not seek to replace what it has torn down with a new edifice, showing instead the problematic character of the aim to construct any edifices at all.*¹³

Resistance to this pessimism of postmodernism is evident in the writings of authors such as Richardson who

reflects upon 'the loss of grand theory' in the field of sociology.¹⁴ Richardson poses a thesis that seeks some positivity:

How in the midst of this ferment and uncertainty do we prevent a paralysis of intellect and the will to work? Why do any intellectual work at all? But, conversely, 'why not?' We can be caught in the infinite regress of deconstructionism, where nothing is better than anything else, but we can also be drawn to infinite expansion.¹⁴

Richardson suggests we 'turn uncertainty to our advantage' by being 'more sociologically imaginative in our thinking, apprehending, and writing of the social world'.¹⁴

Proponents of a search for goodness in qualitative research find it difficult to ignore the relevance to the criterion problem of these contemporary schools of thought. To abandon a search may be to sink into an infinite regress of meaninglessness; to continue a search may be to acknowledge the need for reference points as to what is 'good'; to engage a postmodern sensibility is to recognise the profound difficulty of all 'positions'.

CONCLUSION

The good, the bad . . .

Nursing imagination about goodness in qualitative research is still to find full expression. In searching for ways to make value judgements about qualitative knowledge, perhaps (as Richardson suggests¹⁴) uncertainty can be turned to advantage, and novel avenues of thought forged, whereby both the impracticability of the grand narrative is recognised, as well as the richness and value of local contexts and meanings appreciated. Bringing such notions together creates a paradox, the irony of which is well highlighted by Parusnikova in her engaging paper 'Is a postmodern philosophy of science possible?'¹⁵

An invigorating development within nursing literature is the recognition of such ironies, together with a discussion of how they impact upon the developing tradition of qualitative research. For example, Parsons discusses at length the 'crisis of legitimation and representation' in research methodology, brought about largely by postmodern debates.¹⁶ While Parsons sees the postmodern era as 'bedevilled with insight, innovative and tentative methods and techniques, a reappraisal of epistemologies and ontologies, and contradiction', she also acknowledges that researchers must meanwhile 'get on with the activities of research that, for many, straddle modern and postmodern praxis'.¹⁶ Faced with meeting the positivist

language demands and modernist research design expectations of funding agencies, Parsons finds she is nevertheless able to usefully integrate postmodern critiques of her modernist methods within research reports. She believes nurse researchers are especially well placed in this regard because of their diverse experience with people from all walks of life. Reed is another nursing author who proposes a framework for incorporating both modernist and postmodernist philosophies, referring to her framework as being beyond postmodernism or 'neomodernist'.¹⁷

Not all nursing authors share such optimism. Kermodé¹⁸ challenges the relevance of postmodernist ideas for contemporary nursing, and is critical, for example, of Watson's 1993 paper 'Postmodernism and knowledge development in nursing'¹⁹ for making 'extravagant claims' about nursing and postmodernism. He believes nurses are caught in a 'postmodern hoax' whereby they are prepared to forfeit control over their future in the face of capitalism and patriarchy, grand narratives which are not dead. One of the present paper's authors has also written in this vein, questioning whether nurses are wise to give up their humanist values to postmodernism, when in some respects they are still to experience their own enlightenment.²⁰ (Those interested in such debates may enjoy Wickham's paper, 'Theorising sociology in the face of postmodernism' in which he reaches what he calls 'a tactically useful ambiguity' towards postmodernism.²¹)

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With the expression 'postmodernist qualitative research' upon us,¹⁸ we raise here the potential value of including among one's criteria for goodness a 'criterion of uncertainty'; that is, an open acknowledgement that claims about our research outcomes are at best tentative and that there may indeed be no way of showing otherwise. While such statements can be found in research reports, they usually appear as an apology for methodological weakness, not as an indication of the philosophic strength of the work. Our point is that to openly declare the uncertainty of one's work is to acknowledge the current state of play of knowledge development. Thorne is instructive on this same point when she speaks of reverence for 'probable truth', recognition that no set of standards can 'ensure confidence that research findings are indeed entirely valid'.²²

In searching for ways to establish goodness in qualitative research, an array of ideas has been developed over the past few decades, informed by changing conceptions

of science and knowledge development. It strikes us that we are not faced with an either/or situation here: a notion of juxtapositioning (akin to Parson's¹⁶ notion of 'straddling') suggests that ideas can quite successfully jostle for legitimacy according to the particular situation. No one set of criteria can be expected to 'fit the bill' for every research study. The diversity of approaches and traditions that is building within qualitative research alone works against such a possibility.

Taken with this, a growing appreciation of postmodern debates about the fragility of knowledge leads to a celebration, rather than a decrying, of uncertainty and ambiguity. Such an approach arguably requires a thoughtful consideration of all possibilities for judging goodness within the particular situation, along with full and explicit documentation, like the 'decision trail' described by Koch.²³ Important, is recognition that ultimately our decisions amount to a judgement call. As Marshall, in reviewing the historical evolution of assumptions affecting goodness criteria, puts it:

*We are merely making a judgment when deciding whether one study is more valid than another. We have to decide whose biases were more correct. All of the earlier assumptions really lead to this reality: evaluating the goodness and value of research requires a judgement call.*²⁴

The common inclusion of quantitative elements within qualitative nursing research designs indicates that notions of reliability, validity and generalisability are of continuing importance. Indeed, reliability and validity in all their transformations are likely to persist within qualitative research. For example, Lincoln acknowledges that she still finds 'foundational' criteria (reliability and validity) useful when working with doctoral students.⁴ At the same time, nursing researchers shall continue to seek different means of demonstrating goodness within their qualitative projects, about which there is an increasingly useful body of literature upon which to draw.

One suggestion, as mentioned, for determining goodness in qualitative research is to include evidence of a postmodern sensibility in such form as a 'criterion of uncertainty'. To ignore the criterion problem within a postmodern context could be doing a disservice to the society we seek to better through our qualitative research, a point of ethics as much as goodness.

Out of an increased appreciation of conceptions of goodness in qualitative research, potential exists for

further clarification of terms and their meanings. As stated, although the usage of terms in the literature is not consistent, some associations can be made. For example, 'goodness' is a generic, even philosophic, term that is used in a seeming attempt to identify quality in all dimensions of qualitative research; rigor, principles, standards, and evaluation hold quantitative connotations despite their usage within qualitative contexts; while critique, connoisseurship, artistry, and poetics hold particular and pointed qualitative connotations. Yet, within all terms and usages, the criterion problem lurks. Meanwhile, postmodernist thinking decries all such searches for order and meaning, usefully reminding us that it is never too late to ask: 'Whose criteria?' 'Criteria for what?' and, 'Why criteria at all?'

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