

# Quality in qualitative research: a relational process

Virpi Timonen  
*University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland, and*  
Geraldine Foley and Catherine Conlon  
*Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Demonstrating quality in qualitative research is challenging. Excessive reliance on checklists can lead to poor quality qualitative research masquerading as high quality. We seek to equip readers with foundational understanding of how to ensure quality of their qualitative research by emphasizing a relational approach to research.

**Design/methodology/approach** – We outline existing paradigm-specific and cross-paradigm accounts of the constituents of quality in qualitative research and identify credibility and relevance as the shared criteria. We define quality in qualitative research as a relational process wherein the relations constitutive of credibility and relevance are actively constructed throughout the research process.

**Findings** – Quality cannot be ensured with the help of checklists alone. Quality arises from formulating a research question that is relevant; sampling for (or accessing) data through a credible process pertaining to the relevant concern; engaging analysis in a credible manner and doing justice to the data while continuing to remain relevant to the studied concern. Quality in qualitative research is a set of relationships, threaded through the entire research process, between the researcher and the researched concern, participants, data, data analysis and audience. The foundations of qualitative inquiry, across all paradigms, demand an engaged, committed researcher attending iteratively and with care – relationally – to every stage of the research process in pursuit of quality.

**Originality/value** – We elaborate parsimonious quality criteria that are specific to qualitative research. Adopting a relational ethic of commitment to quality at each stage of the research process is conducive towards high-quality qualitative research.

**Keywords** Quality, Qualitative research, Paradigm, Credibility, Relevance, Relationality

**Paper type** Research paper

Qualitative research entails naturalistic, unstructured or semi-structured engagement with the constituency of concern and usually human relations are the subject and focus of study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013; Hennick *et al.*, 2020). Qualitative research publications generally have a (sub) section which includes an outline of limitations, but they rarely contain an explicit statement on how quality was defined and ensured. Our experience as qualitative researchers across academic, applied policy and practitioner-research projects suggests that quality cannot be achieved through

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specified metrics and standardized conditions alone. Rather, in this article we develop the argument that quality must be constituted *relationally* across the entire research process.

Debates about quality of qualitative research have been extensive (e.g. [Hammersley, 2007](#); [Morse et al., 2002](#); [Seale, 1999a](#)); the purpose of this article is not to rehearse or resolve them. In broaching these debates, it is helpful to understand that the impetus for elaborating quality criteria often has been the allegation that qualitative research methodologies are vague regarding the validity and reliability of research findings ([Golafshani, 2003](#)). Such allegations typically have emerged from within (positivist, quantitative) research traditions that see themselves as contrasting or even conflicting with qualitative research ([Devers, 1999](#); [Loder et al., 2016](#)). Hence, the endeavour to develop checklists and criteria for qualitative research has been imbued with a degree of defensiveness, and more-or-less reluctant anchoring in criteria for quantitative research practices. Accordingly, checklists tend to be recommended by journals that publish mostly quantitative research, and we acknowledge that they can be helpful for gauging some widely accepted indicators of rigorous qualitative research. These checklists include, for example, the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) ([O'Brien et al., 2014](#)), and the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) ([Tong et al., 2007](#)). However, steering the quality of qualitative research cannot, we argue, be done with the help of a checklist alone and where checklists are excessively relied on, the result might be poor quality qualitative research masquerading as high quality. This is because checklists and formulaic criteria are not sufficient evidence of the key constituent of qualitative research of high quality – the consistent implementation of the relational approach that we elaborate further in the text.

Methods chapters or sections in quantitative articles typically outline methods briefly. Qualitative researchers by contrast often delve into reporting on the *process* of the research (e.g., why the research question or design had to be altered). Setting out “the story” in the methods outline of a qualitative empirical project does not detract from quality but rather enhances it. Understanding why such transparency is in fact an element of quality can be hard to comprehend, especially if approaching qualitative research with a rigid checklist in hand. We argue that qualitative research entails attending to aspects of quality *continuously* in the decisions taken *throughout* the stages of formulating questions, generating data, analysis and writing, that jointly constitute – as we explain later in this article – a *relational process*.

Quality can seem an elusive concept for the qualitative researcher in both academic and practice-based research, not in the least because few published sources address quality *succinctly* and *accessibly*. Against this background, it is perhaps understandable why recourse has been taken to developing standard criteria and employing checklists. In their article on reporting standards for qualitative primary, qualitative meta-analytic and mixed methods research, [Levitt et al. \(2018\)](#) write that “qualitative research involves a plurality of inquiry traditions, methods, and goals” which share the aim of engaging “an iterative process of inferences” (p. 27); this plurality is indeed another motivation for the drive to develop quality criteria. Their criteria for manuscripts reporting qualitative primary research run to four pages of specifications, including for example: “indicate the mean and the range of time duration in the data-collection process”. Including such information in a manuscript is conducive towards establishing the scientific credentials of a study. However, we contend that stating, for example, “the interviews ranged from 30 to 75 min”, or even “ticking all the boxes” in a lengthy list of criteria, is not in itself *sufficient* proof of the quality of the research. For example, while the interview duration could be reported correctly, the interview data might be poor and stretched in answering the research question due to inadequate and careless engagement by the researcher(s). We contend that relying on checklists, where done in a merely demonstrative and formulaic manner, carries a serious risk of poor-quality qualitative research passing as high quality: filling in a checklist is easy, whereas maintaining the relational engagement that high-quality qualitative research necessitates is demanding.

Quality of qualitative research often is discussed (e.g. [Johnson et al., 2020](#); [Mays and Pope, 2000](#); [Seale, 1999b](#)) without encapsulating it in a defining sentence or phrase, and hence quality may indeed present as elusive or as the sum of various “tick box” requirements. In this article, we seek to define and operationalize quality in qualitative research differently: by

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outlining the *relational processes* that – we contend – constitute quality. We do not offer a checklist but rather put forward the case for commitment to quality *throughout the research process*, alongside questions and prompts that help to steer the course of research in a direction that is likely to result in qualitative research of high quality. We do so by putting *relationality* at the centre of *quality* in qualitative research.

While relationality is traditionally more associated with some methodologies than others, we argue for its broader relevance and centrality to qualitative research across paradigms. Relationality is the lynchpin to quality because it foregrounds and implicates the researcher who is at the centre of qualitative enquiry. Acknowledging relationality at work in qualitative research where the researcher is *the* central research instrument is a critical component of quality that cannot be captured by ticking boxes in a list of “quality indicators”.

Before elaborating on this understanding of *quality as a relational process*, we review some of the criteria promulgated as measures of quality in qualitative research. In approaching the diversity of criteria, we first need to appreciate the influence of paradigms on understandings of quality.

### Paradigms as guides to quality

Guba and Lincoln (1994) emphasize the primacy of paradigms. Qualitative methods can be utilized within different paradigms, and the chosen paradigm determines the approach to qualitative research: “Questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm, which we define as the ... worldview that guides the investigator ... in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). As this article is not a detailed guide to different ontologies within the qualitative research family, a useful simplification here is that if your ontology is (post)positivist, your quality criteria will bear greater resemblance to quality criteria of quantitative research. If your ontology is interpretivist or constructivist (i.e. based on the assumption that realities are subjective, multiple and socially constructed), your quality criteria will place more emphasis on reflexivity, authenticity and resonance. The critical realist position occupies the middle ground, asserting that there is one reality, but people have different perspectives on it which, in turn, shape reality (Archer, 1998). Although often seen as an ontological position underpinning mixed-methods research (Clark *et al.*, 2007; Zachariadis *et al.*, 2013), critical realism also guides stand-alone qualitative research (e.g. Fletcher, 2017) especially among researchers who seek practical relevance.

Critical, post-structuralist and post-modern perspectives challenge the idea that reality is shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender-based forces into objective social structures. Instead, agents’ own subjective knowledge and understandings are privileged as capable of revealing socially and historically constituted values and power relations as well as other forms of being and doing. In critical approaches, researcher-participant relations including reciprocity are crucial and value-driven research for transformative effect is the goal (Spencer *et al.*, 2020). Post-humanist perspectives reject humanist assumptions of an independent, disembodied and autonomous human subject as the basis for acting and knowing, positing instead human existence as part of a complex and adaptive co-existence with other-than-human entities including animals, plants and things that have coevolved with and shaped the human species. This approach challenges how we think about the human, drawing attention to the ethical consequences of our thinking (Wolfe, 2009). While relationality is centre stage in these critical approaches, our understanding of relationality encompasses all qualitative research paradigms, as explained further in the text.

Different stances on quality align with different paradigms and sometimes a particular stance on quality can be misaligned with a paradigm. Take for example triangulation (Moon *et al.*, 2019) – the idea that two (or more) sources of information, types of data or interpretation, when combined or integrated, can yield a *truer picture* of a phenomenon of interest. Whether triangulation makes sense or not depends on your stance regarding (the existence and nature

of) reality. From those perspectives where a singular social reality does not exist, the purpose of triangulation (drawing an accurate “map” of reality) is not meaningful. In this case, researchers can seek to arrive at a consensus over the meaning of data, but they will not approach this task as an attempt at unearthing *the reality* of the situation. A framework referred to as crystallization involves combining multiple research genres and forms of analysis that draw attention to researchers’ own positionality and how meaning is constructed (Ellingson, 2014). This boundary-spanning process allows divergent and multi-genre forms of knowledge to co-exist in support of interpretive and critical perspectives.

While triangulation therefore is not well aligned with constructivism and critical approaches, another widely mentioned “quality control” mechanism – member checking – is. Member checking refers to the practice of returning to one or more participants to check whether the interpretation of data by the researcher(s) holds resonance or rings true to participant(s) (Thomas, 2017). This makes sense for those who understand research findings as co-constructed in the interaction between researcher(s) and participant(s) in the research and for those who privilege situated and subjective perspectives. However, from a (post) positivist stance, this can be problematic: it is possible that the subjects of research cannot see the contours of “the map” (reality) clearly as they are too immersed in their subjective experience. In the (post)positivist perspective, it is the researcher, equipped with the tools of research (theories, concepts, measurements and so on) who is better positioned to see “the shape of things” and hence consulting participants about the veracity of findings might risk compromising rigor. *Respondent validation* is a term preferred by realists (see the discussion of Mays and Pope, 2000), where the aim is establishing alignment between the researcher’s analysis and the researched subjects’ situation.

Because paradigms act as guides to different quality criteria (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), it is not surprising that terminologies denoting elements of research quality vary. Realist quality criteria incorporate various indicators of *rigor*: internal validity (findings reflect reality); external validity (generalizability); reliability (stability of observations) and objectivity (researcher as distanced observer) (Healy and Perry, 2000). In constructivist quality criteria, *trustworthiness* parallels the realist notion of internal validity; *transferability* parallels the realist notion of external validity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Interpretivism, constructivism and post-structuralist approaches strive for *dependability* (instead of using the realist term reliability) and *confirmability* (instead of objectivity). They seek to achieve *authenticity* by conveying close understanding of the research topic in its context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). While it is possible to identify such broadly corresponding terms, paradigms approach quality criteria from different ontological viewpoints.

When we have our bearings regarding different ontological approaches to quality, we can better understand the proponents of varying criteria. One widely used source is the Mays and Pope (2000) article succinctly titled “Assessing quality in qualitative research”. Mays and Pope (2000) have a health services research background (implicitly) grounded in (post) positivist or realist ontology. In keeping with this, the two key quality criteria that they focus on are validity and relevance. With reference to validity, they stress triangulation (comprehensive and convergent analysis), respondent validation and negative case analysis. These are strongly anchored in (post)positivist epistemology: the assumption that we can observe reality and draw an accurate “map” of it if we carefully select our instruments and use them with precision to examine reality from multiple perspectives. Reflexivity and clear, systematic reporting are also included as components of validity by Mays and Pope (2000) in their strong orientation to what they call avoidance of bias.

The starting point for reflections on relevance for Mays and Pope (2000) evidently was generalizability, which they translate into transferability in the case of qualitative research. In the quest for relevant (maximally generalizable, optimally transferable) research findings, they argue that “probability sampling . . . can have its place” in qualitative research (Mays and Pope, 2000, p. 52); this harks to the idea that reality is out there, and researchers seek to map it by applying methods that originate in quantitative research where random (and ideally,

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representative) samples are drawn with the view to generalizability. [Mays and Pope \(2000\)](#) list seven considerations intended to encapsulate the quality of qualitative research. However, arguably five of these are *universalistic* criteria that – with some minor modifications – are also applicable to quantitative research (value and relevance; clarity of research question; match between research question(s) and method(s); varied sample; systematic and replicable data collection and analysis procedures) and only two are of distinctive relevance to qualitative research: contextualization and reflexivity. Furthermore, even the contextualization requirement in [Mays and Pope \(2000\)](#) links to generalizability: contextualization is about sufficient clarity “so that the reader could relate the findings to other settings” (p. 52).

In contrast to the positivist-realist criteria of [Mays and Pope \(2000\)](#), [Charmaz \(2014\)](#), specifies the criteria of credibility (data enable incisive analysis), originality, resonance (concepts provide insight) and usefulness (revealing pervasive processes). Charmaz emphasizes reflexivity understood as transparency in documenting and analysing the researcher’s thought processes and biases. Following a review of different Grounded Theory schools’ quality criteria, [Charmaz and Thornberg \(2021\)](#) set out their broad checklist that incorporates: striving for methodological self-consciousness (i.e. how the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher fits with the approach taken, and how the methods fit with the research objectives and questions); having a critical understanding of the literature; gathering rich data sufficient to make meaningful comparisons between data; remaining open to the data and moving back and forth between data, asking progressively focused questions to expand key analytic concepts in the data; deciphering connections between key concepts and categories; providing a transparent record and justification for sampling, data collection and analysis; looking for as many theoretical connections as possible between data and comparing data with the literature and other sources to examine fit and how the findings extend or alter understanding of the phenomenon being investigated.

The proliferation and divergence of quality criteria by paradigm has not stopped the search for shared (cross-paradigm) criteria; we will next summarize and analyse two such criteria.

### Cross-paradigm quality criteria

As we seek to establish and justify a shared approach to quality, we refer to existing cross-paradigm criteria. Our purpose here is threefold. First, we wish to separate the idea of *necessary* criteria from the idea of *sufficient* criteria and demonstrate that attention hitherto has been focused on the former, leading to a situation where the quality criteria might well be necessary but not sufficient. Related to this, we argue that universal criteria (shared by all research traditions across sciences and humanities) are not sufficient when seeking the crux of quality in qualitative research. Second, we argue that the multiplicity of criteria in the cross-paradigm definitions of quality does not adhere to the principle of parsimony ([Long and Godfrey, 2004](#)) which is necessary for promulgating pragmatic approaches to research quality. Third, we distil two criteria that are necessary *and* sufficient *and* parsimonious *and* shared across the different qualitative research paradigms.

A consensus process among qualitative researchers in Germany ([Strübing et al., 2018](#)) yielded a summary of quality standards published in the *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*. The first of these is adequacy (*Gegenstandsangemessenheit*) which refers to the fit between method and question. Flexibility and reflexivity are required when looking for this fit and “taking the empirical field seriously while maintaining distance from it by generating tension through theoretical reasoning” (p. 83). We argue that adequacy is not so much a hallmark of quality but rather its fundamental *prerequisite*. In other words, adequacy is a *necessary* basic requirement for *all* research, but not a *sufficient* sign of quality in qualitative research specifically.

The second and third criteria as outlined by [Strübing et al. \(2018\)](#) – empirical saturation and theoretical pervasiveness – appear to be strongly influenced by Grounded Theory principles. The emphasis on “the quality of the theoretical relations in which the research is articulated and, consequently, stimulated” (p. 83) and the absence of a strict separation between sampling

and analysis, the primacy of data and connection to data are strongly reminiscent of Grounded Theory. The fourth criteria, textual performance or “strong authorship” – are arguably something that all researchers seek. While the challenges might differ – quantitative reporting must be on point and economical – all forms of (social) scientific writing demand strong writing skills and hence it is hard to see “strong authorship” as a special preserve of qualitative research.

While the meaning of originality is doubtless somewhat different for qualitative researchers, we have not yet encountered a quantitative researcher (of the ambitious kind) who would not want to produce original research, meaning that it is also hard to see originality as the special preserve of qualitative researchers. Quantitative researchers can also employ inductive analytical strategies such as cluster analysis and multiple correspondence analysis in search of original patterns for further, open-ended exploration. In short, there is not much to distinguish criteria for good quality *qualitative* research in [Strübing et al.’ \(2018\)](#) distillation; the criteria reflect necessary *but not sufficient* hallmarks of quality, and some lean strongly towards a specific qualitative research tradition (Grounded Theory).

In another synthesis of cross-paradigm (“big tent”) quality criteria, [Tracy \(2010\)](#) proposes eight key markers of quality: (1) worthy topic, (2) rich rigor, (3) sincerity, (4) credibility, (5) resonance, (6) significant contribution, (7) ethics and (8) meaningful coherence. When each marker with associated, more detailed bullet points is set out ([Tracy, 2010](#), p. 840), these number 30 in total. This is not quite as detailed as the checklists that Tracy critiques in the article, but it is far from parsimonious. Further, several of these 30 items are also relevant for quantitative research (in fact, virtually all empirical research), for example the requirement to use appropriate theoretical constructs and adequate samples. Moreover, some of the detailed criteria are arguably highly subjective or at least subject to debate, such as the requirement that the topic should be “interesting”. Although intuitively appealing, some of the suggestions in [Tracy \(2010\)](#) are cryptic for a novice researcher who might wonder what exactly is meant by statements such as “a researcher with a head full of theories, and a case full of abundant data, is best prepared to see nuance and complexity” (p. 841).

We argue that quality criteria must be more parsimonious than the various expansive sets of criteria while also avoiding lapsing into formulaic checklists. In seeking to elucidate widely *acceptable, sufficient* (beyond necessary and basic) criteria that are *specific to qualitative* research, we will next explain what we mean by quality in qualitative research and the criteria that must be met to ensure quality. To accomplish this task, we address the fundamental issues of *what* is quality and *how* do I ensure quality in my research? We propose a conceptualization of quality that is new in its orientation to quality as a *process* that puts the researcher centre stage and calls for commitment to constructing and maintaining *relations* that are constitutive of quality. As outlined in the next section, we emphasize the applicability and utility of relationality across paradigms.

### Relationality in qualitative research

There is no single, widely-used definition of relationality ([Cruz, 2024](#)); hence we briefly summarise some uses of the term and distil common ground across perspectives on relationality.

Second wave feminist theory departed from the rational economic actor paradigm as the assumed form of relationality and depicted an alternative way of being in the world as a relational being ([Gilligan, 1982](#)). Positionalities, activities and discourses are seen through a relational modality in constructivist feminist and critical theorist research traditions; “feminist-infused participatory and action research is ... built on the development of relationships” ([Lykes and Coquillon, 2007](#), p. 315). Particularly strong examples of relationality can be found in Indigenous research ([Bolton et al., 2023](#); [Mbah et al., 2024](#)) where relationalities of the self are embedded within networks of interdependent relationships knitted together through mutual obligation, common element being relational connections that

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are prioritised over the self. These approaches in turn can be seen as resonating with sociological theories that are deeply relational, such as Latour's Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005; see also Cruz, 2024), as well as new materialist and post-humanist ideation (e.g. Braidotti, 2013) that extend the scope of relationality to the more-than-human (Clark, 2023; Hamm *et al.*, 2023).

While social scientists therefore associate relationality (correctly) with constructivist, critical, feminist and Indigenous perspectives, we consider it important to note that relationality features in many disciplines and fields of research. For example, we find cognitive science approaches illuminating, not in the least because they chime with the abovementioned research paradigms by connecting relationality to the higher cognitive processes of reasoning and categorisation, symbolic processes and the creation of novelty (Halford *et al.*, 2010). Such understandings of relationality as structuring of meanings have significant parallels with constructivist, critical, feminist and Indigenous approaches which all view knowledge creation as a relational process, strive for novel and deep insights and understanding of (symbolic) processes. As parallels in conceptualisation of relationality span realist and post-humanist ontologies, relationality provides a framework for considerations of quality across qualitative research paradigms.

### Quality: a relational process

We argue that quality in qualitative research rests *on a set of relations built (constructed) throughout the research process*. Accordingly, we define quality in qualitative research as a *relational process*. The most important research instrument in all qualitative research is the researcher. "Quality control" is a process where *researcher engagement* with quality is continuous and relational. This process has a beginning, progresses through various stages and concludes. The researcher steers the process by asking the following questions that are anchored in the generalist conceptualization of relationality outlined in the previous section:

How does this research *relate to* prior knowledge, literature, and understanding of the research topic?

How do I (the researcher) *relate to* the concern (that is, the people and phenomena that are) at the center of this research?

How do I *relate to* "my" data?

How do the data *relate to* my analysis?

How do I (through my research) *relate to* the (research) community (the participants and readers)?

(In the case of collaborative research, the above questions can be phrased in the plural (we, our).

Quality in this understanding is a set of relationships between the researcher *and* the researched concern (most commonly: the people and communities implicated in the concern) *and* the research context *and* the data *and* the analysis of the data *and* the audience or readership of the research. Hence, quality is threaded through the entire research process from the point at which the research focus is sharpened to the point at which the research is communicated to others. Quality in this understanding arises from (1) formulating a research question that is *relevant* (for the studied concern, participants, researchers and practitioners); (2) sampling for (or accessing) data through a *credible* process that pertains to the *relevant* phenomenon/experience; (3) engaging analysis in a manner that is *credible* – true to the data and (3) doing justice to the data (drawing *credible* conclusions), while continuing to remain *relevant* to the studied concern. We argue that relationality is the vehicle through which these components are achieved.

*Quality in qualitative research involves holding these relationships together*, and this in turn requires paying attention, throughout the research process, to (1) credibility and (2) relevance. Of these two shared quality criteria, credibility pertains chiefly to the *how* (is this

research (being) conducted?). Credibility is discernible throughout the research process. It is deeply relational and processual. Relevance pertaining to what (*what* does this research pertain to and seek to contribute?) is relational as it involves connecting to existing frames of reference with a view to contributing to knowledge and understanding and relaying these contributions to those who wish to apprehend (and utilize) them. Indeed, in projects taking a critical approach, the research findings ought to be usable towards transformative, emancipatory conditions, yet credibility is also at the heart of realist and (post)positivist approaches.

Relevance and credibility remain after we exclude from the multitude of quality criteria reviewed in the previous sections those that are either too generic or objectionable to researchers from different paradigms (e.g. validity does not feature in post-structuralism). Relevance and credibility are the shared hallmarks by which we know that a piece of qualitative research is of good quality, as endorsed (in different ways) by all paradigms. While we argue that credibility and relevance are the quality criteria that all qualitative researchers can agree on, arriving at these hallmarks of quality necessitates certain steps that engage the relational approach.

### **Credibility and relationality**

We certainly are not the first to emphasize credibility as a core constituent of quality in (qualitative) research (e.g. [Barbour, 2003](#); [Glaser and Strauss, 1966](#); [Lincoln and Guba, 1985](#)). All qualitative researchers seek to be plausible and want to engage in research that others (within and ideally also outside their own paradigm) consider credible. As outlined above, in the (post)positivist paradigm, credibility features in the form of exhortations to reliability and replicability. Constructivists employ the terms trustworthiness and dependability when referring to credibility. Credibility therefore constitutes shared ground, from different perspectives but underpinned by relational research practices.

The widely agreed-upon vehicles for demonstrating credibility in qualitative research are transparency, contextualization, reflexivity (positionality) and consistency. From a relational perspective where the qualitative researcher is central, *transparency* demands openness about methods, data and their limitations; linking analysis and data and openness about any data that might run counter to argument. Where mutuality and reciprocity inform the research approach, transparency entails (relational) openness and accountability with research participants about research purposes, procedures for meaning-making and potential application of findings. *Contextualization* is necessary because all qualitative researchers regardless of paradigm attest that experiences and perceptions are shaped by context and relations therein ([Korstjens and Moser, 2017](#)). Contextualizing the findings of any qualitative study is necessary so that they can be compared or related to findings from other studies conducted in similar and different contexts.

*Reflexivity* takes lighter and deeper forms, depending on the researcher's ontology; a qualitative researcher whose ontological viewpoint aligns more with realism than constructivism might not elaborate on their reflexivity as extensively as a researcher who is deeply rooted in constructivism. In contrast, critical perspectives require researchers to interrogate the effects of their own positionality on their research and to anticipate power relations lest the researcher's worldview risk overshadowing the worldviews of those being researched. Critical researchers are called on to recognise and challenge unexamined assumptions inherent in their own thinking within the inquiry so that they can privilege participants' standpoints. Regardless of such differences, practising reflexivity entails a relational process of committed engagement with the researched concern directed towards disclosing researcher positionality and being mindful of power imbalances in the research process.

*Consistency* – regardless of paradigm – enhances credibility: this can be demonstrated by giving examples of analytical processes such as searching for consensus with another coder (a relational process); or checking both the data and findings with the population of concern and

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other stakeholders (again, a relational process). Where singular realities are assumed, consistency can be demonstrated by keeping from start to finish a detailed log of all research activities and study procedures should other researchers seek to replicate the study in a different context or consider their own investigation against the background of prior studies. In research where coding is part of the methodology, credibility requires credible coding and subsequently credible categorization or thematic grouping of the data (St. Pierre and Jackson, 2014). Different qualitative methodologies approach data analysis differently but in all cases, coding needs to be balanced – the researcher must not neglect relevant parts of data or pay disproportionate attention to some elements (although every dataset has parts that are richer than others). Themes or categories should be internally coherent, not overly complex or confusing; codes find a home within them. Themes or categories should be examined in relation to each other (Bazeley, 2009) to identify connections between them that can elucidate key processes and patterns across the data. All these tasks require researcher relationality vis-à-vis the data and analysis and, ultimately, accountability for how this was achieved.

We advise that, in pursuit of credibility, researchers should not just allow data to accumulate, but rather ought to *think about* and/or *with* their data during the process of generating (or accessing) the data. This involves paying close attention to *what is going on* in the data while seeking to draw out an abstract understanding of the studied concern. This level of attention necessitates reasonable degrees of probing, prompting and clarification, to understand and account for key incidents, behaviours, perceptions, experiences or other relevant concerns in the data. In paradigms emphasising mutuality between researcher and researched, a collaborative process of building meanings is iteratively achieved by researcher (s) sharing insights to deepen meaning as data generation progresses. Thinking about the data involves varying degrees of relationality through co-construction between the researcher(s) and the participants. Memoing, traditionally associated with Grounded Theory (Birks *et al.*, 2008), can be highly conducive towards relating the data and analysis through documenting the research process for most qualitative researchers and can feature as part of the overall approach to establishing credibility in the form of transparency regardless of paradigm (McGrath, 2021).

### Relevance and relationality

We argue that all qualitative research as relational process should orient to relevance throughout the research, starting with topic and focus that are relevant – of concern (and of *potential* use) – for research participants, research communities and society. Critical approaches concerned with transformation and emancipation underpin the entire research process with relevance. For example, participatory action research approaches involve the constituency of interest in forging the parameters of the study. Relevance, like credibility, points to context. Context is relationally constituted by the researcher(s), participants, practitioners (where applicable) and/or sites and sources for data so that the research question (s) are both enabled and addressed (Riese, 2019). Qualitative research must always consider the natural contexts where groups and individuals of concern to the research exist in order to arrive at an understanding of their situatedness (Korstjens and Moser, 2017).

Relevance is not just an outcome of qualitative research. Rather, relevance begins at the design stage and features throughout data collection and analysis. This means that the researcher is actively engaged in (i.e. relates to) the generation (or selection) of data and understanding from start to finish (an outcome achieved *with* participants where mutuality is a concern). Relevance of the data and findings is manifest as *resonance* and *potential utility* for the people and communities that the research relates to. The researcher must ask: do the findings resonate with the participants in the study and the constituency and positionality they represent? However, this is not the same as generalizability or everyone agreeing what should be done about the matter of concern. Resonance is closely associated with transferability and naturalistic generalizability (Tracy, 2010), processes whereby those who read or hear about the

research can relate to its relevance and possible (partial) applicability to another context familiar to them. For the (practitioner) research community, resonance is evidenced through useful abstractions that are endorsed as contribution to knowledge, although establishing this might take a long time and take various forms.

Persistence, sensitivity and flexibility in the search for understanding (*Verstehen*) run through research design, sampling, data collection and analysis in qualitative research, which collectively steer engagement with both scholarship and the empirical enquiry to achieve relevance (Hennink *et al.*, 2020; Pultz, 2018). Relevance also entails considering the role of theory. All research relates to theory somehow but not all qualitative research is guided by a “theoretical framework” – it is important to be clear about the role of theory (Collins and Stockton, 2018) in *your* research. Theoretical sensitivity refers to the ability to know what data are important in the context of theory and why – in other words, what is both meaningful and significant in the data relative to existing or developing theory. Generalising to abstractions and/or at the level of theory involves explicating what patterns feature in the data, and elucidating these patterns in the data – when saturated for meaning and context – strengthens the relevance of the findings.

Relevance also relates to and arises from the political nature of research (Bandola-Gill, 2019). Both the researcher and participants are members of society and its power structures, and these structures influence the relational nature of research undertaken and how it is funded (Tarozzi, 2013). Finally, the relevance of research relates to its specification of future research. In many cases, qualitative research seeks to map out key parameters of the topic of concern before they are subject to further (qualitative and quantitative) investigation. Clear articulation of remaining research lacunae and new questions that have arisen in research publications (and other forms of communicating findings) are important markers of relevance and relationality.

### **Steps towards instilling relevance and credibility relationally**

Some practical steps are useful in seeking to ensure that quality is built into the process of qualitative research by remaining focused on relevance and credibility through attention to relationality. Qualitative research is often initiated with a topic or area of interest rather than a question in mind. Formulating the research question(s) can take a long time in a qualitative project, but this process is aided by attempts to formulate an *actual question* (a sentence followed by “?”). Being clear about the focus of a qualitative enquiry helps researchers to ensure that their research is credible and will also assist in establishing its relevance. When the researcher is clear about the focus, they can *relate* their study to the relevant literature, plan collecting relevant data, and make a credible case for contributing to understanding in relevant fields.

Relevance of the research question can be probed by asking whether the question matters to people, especially those whom the research concerns. An early indicator to the researcher in the field is how their attempts to recruit participants to the study are received. Research questions that resonate with the constituency of concern and succeed in having people come forward to participate indicates relevance. The data generated during early stages of a project are useful testing ground for the direction of the study.

Critical perspectives go further and seek potential for transformation and emancipation in considering what is relevant. Researchers concerned with quality should be attuned to these indicators of relevance and opportunities to fine tune studies for relevance from the outset of the study design and early data generation. In some areas of research such as health care where practitioner researchers often feature, the prevalent view now is that relevance means ensuring that the public whom the research relates to are actively involved in designing and overseeing the research in formal collaborator or co-investigator roles. Research questions formulated by the researcher without relational engagement with the public of concern can fall short in terms of relevance (impact and benefits) for the population of concern. Relevance cannot be established without relationality; again, this is particularly well-illustrated by Indigenous

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research where relevance and relationality may encompass culturally significant more-than-human elements such as the land, animals, ancestors and other actors and actants at the centre of the enquiry (Denzin and Salvo, 2020; Kerr and Adamov Ferguson, 2021).

In qualitative research, it is usually essential to approach data collection with an open mind, but also informed of prior theories to the extent that is suitable for the research paradigm and methodology. It is helpful to establish at least some understanding of concepts that are likely to be relevant before initiating the data collection process. Ensuring that the data in fact relate to and are relevant to the research question might necessitate revisiting the relevance of the research question and refining it. The flexibility of qualitative research allows the researcher to do so where necessary. Ensuring that the data give scope to say something interesting means that the data must “speak” (relate) to the research question in a nuanced manner. This in turn necessitates skill and care in generating data (or in accessing and understanding the background to the generation of secondary data). When the research approach is concerned with reciprocal research relations, the fit between data and research question can be iteratively explored during data generation. For example, as tentative insights emerge, these can be explored in subsequent data generation episodes to test their relevance and credibility with the researched community (Charmaz, 2014; Salzano *et al.*, 2023).

Focusing on relevance and credibility through relationality can help to pre-empt some of the (often unfair or misinformed) questions from people with little or no familiarity with qualitative research – such as “what can you say on the basis of interviewing only 15 people” or “how do I know you are not just presenting selected data extracts to support your opinion”? These can be countered by saying, for example, that interviewing more people is unlikely to result in additional data that is *relevant* for answering the research question, and that the findings are *credible* for research participants. Detailing iterative processes of sampling and meaning making during the data generation process and emphasising the value of situated knowledge (as appropriate for the chosen ontology) can also counter such challenges. Misinformed comments often fall on the issue of generalizability because of a lack of understanding about transferability in qualitative research. It is not unusual for qualitative researchers who submit their work to journals that publish more quantitative than qualitative research in their field, to be asked to highlight in the limitations section of a manuscript that their work is limited because it does not generalize. In these situations, a focus on relevance and credibility, including weaving these criteria explicitly into the methods section of the work, is an effective platform from which to emphasize the quality and relational nature of the research. Finally, although disinclined to provide or recommend checklists, we suggest asking (and answering) the questions in [Table 1](#) during the research process. These are the same questions that were posed above, and the resolutions are a short version of key steps recommended when working towards credibility and relevance by engaging the relational approach.

## Conclusion

We define quality in qualitative research as a relational process that aims at, and delivers, credible and relevant contributions to knowledge and understanding. Qualitative research progresses towards and meets the shared quality criteria of credibility and relevance where researchers are able to give certain reassurances to themselves, others working with them, those they research (with) and ultimately those who read their research. All these reassurances are grounded in the idea of relationality where the researcher(s) acknowledge(s) and act(s) according to the precept that the researcher(s) is (are) responsible for credible and relevant accounts of the relationship of their enquiry to existing knowledge, the research context and participants, the data, the findings and the ideas, arguments and theorising that ensue from the research.

Quality in qualitative research necessitates that the researcher – academic, applied and practitioner alike – knows how, why and under what conditions the empirical material (data) have been generated, selected or accessed; this might sound obvious, but these elements are surprisingly often absent, even in projects led by senior investigators. A qualitative researcher

**Table 1.** Questions and steps towards qualitative research of high quality

Question	Steps
How does this research <i>relate to</i> prior knowledge, literature and understanding of the research topic?	Focus and perspective defined; clear question(s) that signal(s) qualitative approach, iteratively refined; concepts, theories and lacunae that animate the research are justified
How do I (the researcher) <i>relate to</i> the concern (that is, the people and phenomena that are) at the center of this research?	Design adjusted where necessary in line with flexibility in qualitative research; logic of quantitative inquiry not superimposed in ways that are contrary to the ends and means of qualitative research
How do I <i>relate to</i> “my” data?	Account of <i>your</i> understanding of your role in the research (reflexivity); data enable you to answer the research question(s); engagement with data is evident through outline of analytical processes
How do the data <i>relate to</i> my analysis?	Analytical process is carefully documented so that the reader can follow the logic and consequences of choices and interpretations
How do I (through my research) <i>relate to</i> the (research) community (the participants and readers)?	Where relevant, research participants have been given time and choices; participated voluntarily following informed consent; their anonymity respected; received something in return (e.g. summary of findings, community advocacy); the research is of relevance and interest to others/practitioners in the field

**Source(s):** Authors’ own work

committed to quality has a strong grasp of the data, has thought about and *with* the data in a theoretically engaged way, thereby forging a relationship between the data and analysis that the researcher can account for. The analysis and argumentation are in dialogue with – relate to – other research, concepts and theory. These are the hallmarks of qualitative research of high quality, achieved through relational processes focusing on credibility and relevance.

We contend that the root cause of common missteps in qualitative research often lies in lacking commitment towards research quality. If we are committed to and care about our research and participants, we will think about them more deeply and take care in approaching them: the best route to quality runs through care and commitment which are enabled and strengthened through the relational approach. The foundations of qualitative inquiry, across all paradigms, demand an engaged, committed researcher attending iteratively and with care – relationally – to every stage of the research process in pursuit of quality. Formalistic procedures for quality control in human inquiry are not a sufficient guarantee of quality. Concern with quality of qualitative inquiry goes hand in hand with commitment to relevance and credibility threaded through and evidenced at every stage of the relational research process.

Relational knowledge involves delving into substructures of meaning-making and signification which differs significantly from “box ticking” – the researcher is trying to access novel insights into how meaning is built and how shared understandings are arrived at. Qualitative research is never just about capturing responses; the qualitative researcher cannot be a passive collector of data, but rather needs to interact with (relate to) persons, fields of knowledge, ways of seeing and through these interactions they build understanding relationally. As an important addition (that needs to be fully teased out in another paper), we posit that relationality is also the key reason why Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not able to replace the qualitative researcher: AI is not able think relationally and cannot generate relational knowledge. Creation of insight through relational processes remains the domain of the human qualitative researcher.

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### About the authors

Virpi Timonen completed her doctorate from the University of Oxford in 2001 and worked for almost 20 years at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. She is now Professor of Social and Public Policy at the University of Helsinki, Finland. She has conducted research on social policies in ageing societies, sociology of intergenerational relationships and theorised social construction of active and successful ageing in policymaking. Her current research, funded by the European Research Council's Advanced Grant, seeks to generate new insights into the material and environmental legacies that pass between co-existing generations. Virpi Timonen is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [virpi.timonen@helsinki.fi](mailto:virpi.timonen@helsinki.fi)

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Geraldine Foley is an Associate Professor in Occupational Therapy in the School of Medicine, Trinity College Dublin. Her research is primarily in the field of life-limiting illness, focused on patient, caregiver and healthcare professional needs and decision-making in supportive and palliative care. She has served as an expert reviewer on large-scale international research calls and is an editorial board member of BMC Palliative Care. She is co-academic course coordinator of the MSc Cancer Survivorship programme at Trinity College Dublin.

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Catherine Conlon is an Associate Professor in Social Policy at Trinity College Dublin. Her research focuses on the social politics of reproduction and sexuality, abortion and crisis pregnancy, sexual socialisation and inter-generational relations. She currently investigates women's experiences of using unplanned pregnancy supports and abortion care services in Ireland since legalisation of abortion in January 2019.

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