

# Challenges on current practice of qualitative research: reflections and researcher positioning

Desafios atuais da prática em pesquisa qualitativa: reflexões e posicionamento do pesquisador (resumo: p. 06)

Desafíos actuales de la práctica de la investigación cualitativa: reflexiones y posicionamiento del investigador (resumen: p. 06)

**Carina Carlucci Palazzo<sup>(a)</sup>**

<carinacp@usp.br> 

**Rosa Wanda Diez-Garcia<sup>(b)</sup>**

<wanda@fmrp.usp.br> 

<sup>(a)</sup> Pós-graduanda do Programa de PósGraduação em Clínica Médica (doutorado), Departamento de Clínica Médica, Faculdade de Medicina de Ribeirão Preto, Universidade de São Paulo (USP). Avenida dos Bandeirantes, 3900. Ribeirão Preto, SP, Brasil. 14049-900.

<sup>(b)</sup> Departamento de Ciências da Saúde, Nutrição e Metabolismo, Faculdade de Medicina de Ribeirão Preto, USP. Ribeirão Preto, SP, Brasil.

Building on the provocative speech given by researcher Svend Brinkmann at the 17<sup>th</sup> Qualitative Health Research Conference, this paperwork aims to critically think over three challenges faced during the current practice of qualitative research, and also the role of the researcher in this context. We have taken into consideration ethical issues and issues of recognition and validation of the research, as well as issues related to methodological rigor, which highlight the role of the researcher in the recognition and valuation of qualitative research, particularly in the health research field.

**Keywords:** Qualitative research. Ethics. Recognition. Method. Rigor.



The path one has to take to become a qualitative researcher imposes challenges that go beyond the common challenges faced by any other researcher. Thinking critically about the particularities of qualitative research can result not only in a more conscientious performance by the researcher, but also in the strengthening of qualitative research in the current scientific scenario.

This paperwork starts out by analyzing three issues proposed by researcher Svend Brinkmann in his speech at the 17<sup>th</sup> Qualitative Health Research Conference<sup>1</sup>, and aims to take a closer look onto some of the current challenges faced by qualitative researchers, as well as the role of the researcher in this context.

## Ethical challenges in qualitative research

In his speech, Brinkmann approaches the power relationships in the consumer society. He says that, nowadays, it is more common for citizens to deal with subtler forms of power, in which control is exercised in an almost imperceptible way<sup>1</sup>, as opposed to dealing with well-defined hierarchical structures.

This subtle form of power can also be seen in the researcher-researchee relationship. Qualitative research training involves the acquisition of techniques used to build a good rapport with the participants, which allows for the production of good research data. Literature brings many examples of pieces of advice given to people on how to behave, how to show empathy, how to express oneself, and even how to dress so that participants of a certain social group, gender or age can feel more comfortable and confident in front of the researcher<sup>2,3</sup>. This practice generates a very asymmetrical, yet concealed, relationship of power between researcher and researchee, since the participant of the research tends to feel welcomed and even cared for in a relationship built according to the researcher's demands. This situation, when interwoven with the widespread notion that qualitative research holds an ethically superior position because it gives voice to the participants and allows them to issue an opinion on the researched matters, makes for a serious obstacle to an ethical practice of research<sup>1</sup>.

Consequently, acknowledging the asymmetry of power relationship between researcher and researchee is the first step towards a more ethical research practice. Furthermore, it is relevant to reconsider the purpose of the research. Extractive research, that is, research that sees participants as mere data providers<sup>4</sup>, will hardly be consolidated as ethically appropriate. Seeing the participants as more than subjects of a research includes providing support for the demands that may arise from the relationship with the researcher, as well as carefully planning the moment when the research shall be brought to an end, i.e., the time to leave the field<sup>5</sup>.



## Solid evidence versus subjective anecdotes

Currently, the sovereignty of randomized controlled trials in terms of alignment and contribution to evidence-based science is undeniable. In these terms, qualitative research is undervalued and even considered unable to provide reliable and applicable results. In response to this scenario, some qualitative researchers state that qualitative research does not deal with objective issues, but rather, with subjective, personal, and contextual matters. This opposition made between objectivity and subjectivity may end up having a reverse effect, once subjective results are often considered not reliable, which reduces the knowledge resulting from qualitative research to anecdotes<sup>1</sup>.

Considering the importance of promoting improved visibility, understanding, and appreciation of qualitative research in the academic environment and in society as a whole, we believe it is paramount that qualitative researchers position themselves as educators in relation to peers from other onto-epistemological perspectives.

The result of a research work conducted with rigor, i.e., by coherently aligning theoretical and methodological aspects in every stage of the study, and in an organized, analytical, and critical way, should never be reduced to anecdotes<sup>6</sup>. Promoting the recognition of the contributions made by qualitative research also depends on the way researchers share their work, which reveals the earnestness with which the process was conducted and the contributions made to their research fields.

## Method versus intuition

One of the most striking hallmarks of qualitative research is the importance of creativity. There is no one single model to be followed, even when a specific methodology is assumed to be used. The employment of creativity is what allows us to work with completely different populations, in different contexts and in a flexible way, i.e., the use of creativity is what makes us able to modify the use of techniques throughout the research development. It is the sensitivity and the experience of the researcher, who, in this case, functions as the main research instrument, that will determine the nuances and details of the approach. In spite of that, however, we currently see a tendency towards the standardization of qualitative research approaches<sup>1</sup>.

This tendency is discussed by researchers Braun and Clarke who have found, over the years, that many works in which the Thematic Analysis technique they developed had been used as though it were a “culinary recipe,” that is, something expected to be followed step by step in a very unreflective way<sup>7</sup>.

This is something that may be partly related to the misuse of quantitative parameters based on productivity as a way of assessing qualitative research. A thorough field research, followed by the theoretical depth needed for data analysis, is a time-consuming process that, in general, leads to fewer publications than a clinical trial. Therefore, evaluating any given researcher primarily on the grounds of the number of publications they have made ends up jeopardizing the career path of qualitative researchers<sup>8</sup>, who, sometimes, lean onto more “efficient” ways of conducting research and meeting the academic demands.



Regarding the academic environment, there is pressure for decreasing the time spent in postgraduate courses<sup>9</sup>. Researchers deal with short deadlines to fully finalize their research, which limits the possibility of adequate training for researchers and favors the mere application of pre-established steps described in manuals.

If we think about health research, which is traditionally dominated by biomedical thinking and the positivist/post-positivist paradigm<sup>6</sup>, we will see that this “plastering” of qualitative research is convenient, since it contributes to the perception of a research modality more adjusted to the characteristics valued by this field. The valuation of research guided by pre-defined steps extends as far out as to reach scientific journals, which often do not have a competent editorial board to assess qualitative works<sup>10</sup>, and therefore relies on inflexible standardized checklists<sup>11</sup>.

## Conclusion

This paperwork has approached some of the current challenges faced by qualitative researchers. A reflective and engaged posture in relation to academic peers is necessary for the qualitative research not to be left on the margins of scientific production.

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### Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Este artigo parte do discurso provocativo feito pelo pesquisador Svend Brinkmann na 17ª Conferência sobre Pesquisa Qualitativa em Saúde para refletir criticamente sobre três desafios enfrentados na prática atual da pesquisa qualitativa e sobre o papel do pesquisador nesse contexto. São abordadas questões éticas, de reconhecimento e validade da pesquisa e relacionadas ao rigor metodológico que destacam o papel do posicionamento do pesquisador para o reconhecimento e valorização da pesquisa qualitativa, em especial na área de pesquisa em saúde.

**Palavras-chave:** Pesquisa qualitativa. Ética. Reconhecimento. Método. Rigor.

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Este artículo se basa en el provocador discurso pronunciado por el investigador Svend Brinkmann en la 17ª Conferencia de Investigación Cualitativa en Salud para reflexionar críticamente sobre tres desafíos enfrentados en la práctica actual de la investigación cualitativa y el papel del investigador en ese contexto. Se abordan cuestiones éticas, de reconocimiento y vigencia de la investigación y relacionadas con el rigor metodológico, destacando el papel del puesto de investigador para el reconocimiento y valorización de la investigación cualitativa, especialmente en el área de la investigación en salud.

**Palabras clave:** Investigación cualitativa. Principio moral. Reconocimiento. Método. Rigor.