Beyond qualitative/quantitative structuralism: The positivist qualitative research and the paradigmatic disclaimer

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Abstract

Scholarly discourse concerning the distinction between qualitative and quantitative approach often takes on a binary character. This structuralism undermines the legitimacy of positivist qualitative research, a unique method frequently used in social science research. In the present essay, the author argues that positivist qualitative research should be recognized as a unique form of qualitative research. The essay focuses on three issues: (a) the paradigmatic roots of positivist qualitative research, (b) the components of positivist qualitative research as an empirical research approach, including a typology for mapping various manifestations of partially and fully positivist qualitative research, and (c) incorporating a paradigmatic disclaimer section in articles to improve the quality of qualitative research, positivist and non-positivist alike. Recognizing positivist qualitative research as a distinct and legitimate type can improve qualitative studies in social science.

Keywords paradigm; paradigmatic disclaimer; positivism, positivist qualitative research; qualitative research

1 Introduction

The use of qualitative research in social science has a long and distinguished history (Denzin and Lincoln 2003). The field of social science underwent a "qualitative research revolution" in the 1970s and 1980s (Donmoyer and Galloway 2009, p. 7). In social science and education, qualitative research (and researchers), once disregarded and marginalized by hegemonic quantitative research (and researchers), has become a mainstream research approach (Lichtman 2013, p. 91; Seidman 2013, pp. 7-8). Even in positivist-oriented disciplines, such as management (see Pratt 2009), qualitative research, which in the past was called "fiction" and "not science" (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, p. 2), has become legitimate. For example, in educational management, historical analysis has shown that in the 70s-80s it was more difficult to have your qualitative research published (Berkovich and Eyal 2017). Citation analysis of recent works (2009-2013) has shown that the three most cited works in the field used qualitative research methods (Wang and Bowers 2016). Today, qualitative research is an integral part of the scientific discourse in most disciplines in social science (e.g., anthropology (Bernard 2011); communication (Lindlof and Taylor 2010); education (Bogdan and Biklen 2007); management (Myers 2013); political science (McNabb 2015); psychology (Smith 2015); public policy (Sadovnik 2006); and sociology (Marvasti 2003)).

Despite the legitimization and prevalence of qualitative research in social science, not much has changed in the structuralist view according to which qualitative and quantitative research represent contrasting approaches. The common display of qualitative approach vs. quantitative approach in two contrasting columns promotes the perception of a divide (Allwood 2012). This structuralist presentation defines one approach as dependent on what is not included in the other. Several critics have argued against such binary distinction between qualitative and quantitative research (e.g., Bryman 1984; Hammersley 1992 1996). According to these critics, a change in this structuralist framing is past due. For example, Allwood (2012) argues:

> One reason why the [binary] distinction still is used by people responsible for methodology courses and at publishing houses responsible for book series may be that [it] is easy to understand. [however] The separation of research

approaches into qualitative and quantitative in fact constitutes an invitation to simplistic thinking about complicated issues and thus may hinder the development of understanding of research philosophical and methodological issues. (p. 1428)

One topic that is greatly ill served by the structuralist framing of the two research approaches is our understanding of positivist qualitative research, which is a type of scientific exploration that combines qualitative methods with positivist elements. The term "positivist qualitative research" appears in several works in the social sciences (Ashworth 1997, p. 216; Berry and Otley 2004, p. 233; Gephart and Richardson 2008, p. 31; Greckhamer and Koro-Ljungberg p. 736; Lincoln 1998, p. 317; Tan et al. p. 246). Although the literature acknowledges the existence of positivist qualitative research, few scholars have attempted to focus and reflect on it (notable researchers are Peter Ashworth in psychology, and Chad Perry in marketing). The scarcity of positivist qualitative research, also known as realism research (see Healy and Perry 2000; Sobh and Perry 2006), is especially troubling when accepting claims such that many of the qualitative studies in social science are based on assumptions that phenomena exist in reality but that our knowledge about it is partly constructed (e.g., Lund 2005). These are controversial claims because many qualitative researchers express anti-realistic attitudes that reject the premise that the social world is a unified one (Johnson et al. 2007, Mays and Pope 2000; Sandelowski 1993).

In this essay, I contend that positivist qualitative research requires acknowledgment as a unique form of qualitative research. I develop my argument in three stages. First, I define positivist qualitative research as a model of inquiry. Second, I discuss positivist qualitative research as empirical research, and offer a typology for classifying various types of positivist qualitative research. Third, I advocate incorporating a paradigmatic disclaimer in articles to promote the quality of qualitative research, positivist and non-positivist alike.

2 When qualitative research meets positivism

Broad definitions of qualitative research and positivism include multiple detailed statements about the nature of reality, the nature of science, the role of the researcher in the research, and research practices (see a broad definition of positivism in Marsh and Furlong 2012, pp. 22-23, and a broad definition of qualitative research in Sarantakos 2012, pp. 36-37). These types of definitions deny the possibility of combining the two concepts. Perusing the relevant literature on mixed method and grounded theory, which also walk a narrow line between qualitative research and a version of positivist research, revealed that scholars avoided using broad definitions as they denied this fusion (e.g., Creswell 2013, p. 4; Suddaby 2006, p. 638). Some contended that broad definitions of qualitative research and positivism are used mostly by purists who reject all elements associated with the other concept (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004, p. 14). This type of fusion is said to be possible when researchers adopt a more pragmatic orientation and a less normative attitude that avoids triggering an "either-or" dynamic (Howe 1988, 1992).

As a starting point, it is necessary to acknowledge that positivist qualitative research is possible only when we adopt "narrow" definitions of both qualitative and positivist research. The challenge is to choose on which aspects of the concepts to focus, to simultaneously maintain their essence, and at the same time allow a blessed unity of the two. With regard to qualitative research, this effort can be promoted by consulting earlier overviews and syntheses of definitions of the concept. For example, Guest, Namey, and Mitchell's (2012, pp. 2-3) analytical mapping of various definitions of qualitative research identified four types of definitions, which focus on (a) research purpose, (b) epistemological stance, (c) process and context of data collection, (d) and functional aspects. The researchers concluding that definitions that focus on functional aspects capture the fundamental essence of qualitative research, yet avoid a dichotomous positioning of qualitative research with respect to other types of research and epistemological approaches (Guest et al. 2012, p. 3). Another instructive effort is Chesebro and Borisoff's (2007) analysis of six definitions of qualitative research based on different qualitative approaches (naturalistic, qualitative, interpretative, ethnographic, field research, and action research). The authors

identified several common characteristics across the diversity of approaches[1] (p. 9): (a) data collection occurs in a natural setting; (b) it includes communication with participants that is not fully structured; (c) there is an interest in capturing meanings and symbols; and (d) the aim is to produce insights into social phenomena. This definition strategy, which focuses on the common ground, also emphasizes the core functional aspects of qualitative research, which form the "narrow" definition of the concept. Such a "narrow" definition of qualitative research is popular in management studies, which have strong positivist roots (Suddaby 2006). For example, in the field of management, Gephart (2004, pp. 454-455) characterized qualitative research based on the following elements: (a) focus on the processes and meanings of phenomena; (b) tapping into actors' interpretations in a naturalistic manner; and (c) insights into the way in which social experiences are created by social reality, or how such experiences produce social reality.

Functional definitions of qualitative research focus not only on the abstract nature of the data but also on its concrete nature. For example, Nkwi, Nyamongo, and Ryan (2001, p. 1) suggested the following definition by exclusion for qualitative research: "data that do not indicate ordinal values." A narrow definition of other concrete aspects of qualitative research may also include the use of a small sample and reliance on textual data (Sobh and Perry 2006). These aspects are a natural extension of the abstract interest in capturing the complexity of the phenomenon, and they represent a basic trade-off in research between size and depth (Ragin 1994, p. 49).

After identifying the abstract and concrete functional aspects that form the narrow definition of qualitative research, we can turn to defining positivism. Scholars have noted that positivism has become the chief frame of reference in the social sciences (Sale et al. 2002, p. 45). The philosophical foundations of logical positivism, which stress deduction, direct observation, and verifiability, have generated the most extensive criticism, partly because they have led to misconceptions (Goulding 2002). For example, Hunt (1991) argued that positivists do not provide a deterministic

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[1] Chesebro and Borisoff (2007) also noted common characteristics that placed the emphasis on the "researcher as participant;" I omit a discussion of these characteristics because their inclusion among the basic functional aspects of general qualitative research is contested, and they appear linked only with certain qualitative approaches.

outlook but an indeterministic one, which is probability based, nor do they seek to reify and objectify subjective states. Acknowledging these misconceptions somewhat narrows the divide, but still does not allow us to fuse qualitative research with positivism. The two can meet only when positivist research is also narrowly defined. To do so, we must exclude methodological monism, which is often included in "wide" definitions of positivism (e.g., Eisner 1992), and embrace a view of "positivism [that can be] coloured by a certain degree of interpretivism" (Sale et al., p. 47). To this end, in our narrow definition of positivism, we must renounce traditional positivist assumptions, such as the structural separation between the researcher and the research process, and the temporal separation between data collection and analysis (Suddaby 2006), which will deny interpretivism on the part of the researchers. At the same time, a narrow definition of positivism still argues that the phenomenon of interest does not change dramatically across contexts, and that researchers are not personally involved with participants (e.g., Gall et al. 1996). The absence of these aspects undermines the core positivist ideas of highly stable and independent natural phenomena, and is more consistent with relativist thought about local intersubjective nature of social reality and postmodern thought about a value laden nature of social reality (Gephart 2004; Macionis and Gerber 2010; Snape and Spencer 2006). Narrow definitions of positivism describe it as a philosophy of science that includes the assumptions that (Ashworth 1997; 2000): (a) there is an independent world; (b) science can describe the world in theoretical models; (c) theories can represent the links between variables; and (d) research can test theoretical hypotheses and evaluate them. Adopting narrow definitions of both qualitative and positivist research is a precursor to considering positivism as a qualitative paradigm of inquiry and as a form of empirical research.

3 Positivism as a qualitative paradigm of inquiry

Guba and Lincoln (1994) conceptualize paradigm as "a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the 'world,' the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts, as, for example, cosmologies and theologies do" (p. 107). Guba and Lincoln (1994) contended that each inquiry paradigm consists of answers to three key questions (p. 108): "What is

the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?" (i.e., ontology); "What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?" (i.e., epistemology); and "How can the inquirer (would-be knower) go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?" (i.e., methodology). The three elements of a paradigm (i.e., ontology, epistemology, and methodology) can be manifest explicitly or implicitly in a given research work (Sobh and Perry 2006).

Morgan and Smircich (1980) argued that "[o]nce one relaxes the ontological assumption that the world is a concrete structure, and admits that human beings, far from merely responding to the social world, may actively contribute to its creation," the way opens to "many different positions along the subjective-objective continuum" (p. 498). Scholars suggested that beside the two classic theoretical paradigms (i.e., constructivism/ interpretivism and critical theory) that drive qualitative research, there is a third, less discussed paradigm: Positivism. Positivism[2] argues for a "real" reality that operates in an imperfect way and that can be understood only in a probabilistic manner (Guba and Lincoln 1994). This differs from the pure positivist paradigm that borders on behaviorism, views reality as a structure, and perceives humans as responders (Morgan and Smircich 1980).

Realism, which is the philosophical basis of positivist qualitative research, "does not dissent from the orthodox view of the person as being part of a natural system of causes and effects" (Ashworth 2008, p. 4). At the same time, it also acknowledges that social phenomena are complex and involve reflective individuals (Healy and Perry 2000). As paradigm of inquiry, realism is also said to be "neither value-free nor value-laden, rather value-aware" (Healy and Perry 2000, p. 122). Morgan and Smircich's (1980) work divides the realism paradigm and proposes two sub-paradigms. The first views reality as a concrete process in which humans are perceived as adaptors, so that research focuses on the exploration of systems, processes, and changes, typically trough historical analysis. The second sub-paradigm, proposed by Morgan and Smircich, views reality as a contextual field of

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[2] Guba and Lincoln (1994) used the term "postpositivism" to describe this paradigm. This term, however, is also commonly used in the literature to refer to a category of qualitative traditions, such as hermeneutics, critical theory, and poststructuralism, which reject positivist assumptions (see Prasad 2005). To avoid confusion, the present essay uses the term "positivism."

information in which humans are perceived as information processors, so that research focuses on the exploration of settings typically trough contextual analysis.

Despite calls to move beyond "paradigm war," one cannot ignore the fact that epistemological thinking and rivalry are widespread and persistent (Denzin 2008). In my view, the reason for this is that epistemic thinking is a basic cognitive process that guides us in processing and comprehending textual data and ideas (Barzilai and Eshet-Alkalai 2015). In addition to their cognitive function, paradigms have a key normative function in structuring our understanding about how the world should be (Goldstein 1993). For these reasons, I believe that epistemological thinking interacts with practical considerations. Therefore, although I view purist paradigmatic discourse as problematic, I concur with its basic assumption that paradigmatic epistemological thinking is the root of exploration of human experiences and activities.

4 The empirical nuts and bolts of positivist qualitative research

After discussing positivism as a paradigm of inquiry that drives positivist qualitative research, I move from the philosophical to the practical level by focusing on positivist qualitative research as empirical research. In this move, I intend to offer a polylithic practical perspective on a paradigm as an alternative to the monolithic philosophical perspective. A polylithic perspective recognizes loosely connected components involved in research, allowing insights on various possible types of positivist qualitative research. This change in perspective seems warranted when exploring the literature. For example, Firestone (1987), who explored studies in education, concluded that the connection between paradigms and method types is more esthetic and rhetorical than it is logical (p. 20).

Kothari (2004, pp. 1-2) defined research as a " systematic method consisting of enunciating the problem, formulating a hypothesis, collecting the facts or data, analyzing the facts and reaching certain conclusions." I omitted from Kothari original definition the "formulating a hypothesis" component, which is suited only to quantitative research, and I integrated data collection and analysis into a unified design component, based on mainstream claims that these processes are intertwined in qualitative work (Suddaby 2006). A content analysis of the literature on positivist qualitative research (Ashworth 1997, 2000, 2008; Healy and Perry 2000; Sobh and

Perry 2006) led me to identify three stages in the empirical research process, in which positivist emphases may manifest: (a) formulation, (b) design, and (c) interpretation. In parallel, positivist emphases in qualitative inquiry often emerge in one or more of three elements: (a) groundedness in formulation, (b) rigor in design, and (c) generalization in interpretation.

4.1 Positivist groundedness

Positivist qualitative research is often driven by positivist groundedness. Researchers' assumptions about the nature of knowledge as realist and natural (Ashworth 2000) are reflected in the researcher's attitude toward the literature. Positivist qualitative research frequently adopts a mental model of positivism already present in the theoretical background. The mental model is "a structural analog of a real-world or imaginary situation, event, or process that the mind constructs in reasoning" (Nersessian 1999, p. 11). In the mental model of positivism, the principle of truth is central (Johnson-Laird 1999). "The principle applies at two levels. First, individuals represent only true possibilities. Second, for each true possibility, they represent only those literal propositions in the premises—affirmative or negative—that are true" (Johnson-Laird 1999, p. 116). Positivist groundedness, therefore, involves some deductive reasoning, as it adopts an essentialist theory about a phenomenon, and it explores whether it applies to the case at hand. Hyde (2000) suggested that deductive reasoning is possible not only in quantitative but also in qualitative research; however, he stressed that deductive reasoning in quantitative works requires that the concepts of interest be *a priori* defined, and that the proposed relationships between the concepts be stated before data collection. For example, addressing case study research, Yin (1994) suggested that researchers must state *a priori* propositions regarding the features and reasons behind the case, if they intend to use deductive reasoning.

Sobh and Perry (2006) noted that positivist qualitative research often involves extensive reading of the literature about the phenomenon of interest *before* qualitative data collection (i.e., information that is not ordinal and originates from texts, images, or sounds, see Guest, et al. 2012), to better select participants and phrase questions. Researchers complying with the demands of realism consult literature in the process of data collection to be more effective in extracting relevant data and to make sense of

the findings that emerge. The thematic coding used to categorize data and at the same time to narrow its focus is often generated based on existing conceptual frameworks (Sobh and Perry 2006), or on their elements. This is not to say that the researchers' *a priori* theories prevent them from being open to new explanations emerging from participants. This type of thematic analysis is known as "directed content analysis" (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

The positivist groundedness of qualitative research is manifest in research fields that are highly integrative and hierarchal in structure. For example, discussing qualitative research in the field of organizational studies, Pratt (2009) claimed that "[s]imply put, you cannot skimp on theory. It is critical that scholars communicate what theoretical conversations they want to enter, and what the current states of those conversations are" (p. 857).

4.2 Positivist rigor

The purpose of positivist rigor is to create "methodological trustworthiness" and enable external audit of the research and of the knowledge it produced (Healy and Perry 2000; Morrow 2005). Because the positivist viewpoint "presupposes that there is some underlying, true, unequivocal reality… There must be evidence of validity—in the sense of a match between the data and the reality they are supposed to reveal" (Ashworth 1997, p. 91). At the same time, scholars describe the rigor of positivist qualitative research as "contingent" because it deals with an open "fuzzy boundary" system that involves messy productive mechanisms rather than simplistic ones (Healy and Perry 2000).

Ashworth (2000) elaborated on the recommended elements of validity and reliability within positivist qualitative research, including (a) awareness of presumptions and deliberately looking for information that challenges them; (b) involvement in the participants' world, which increases exposure to the complexity of social reality and its multiple meanings; (c) independent peer analysis of data; (d) obtaining data that converged from various sources (corroboration); (e) obtaining data that converged using several data collection techniques (triangulation); and (f) participants' agreement and their comments on the findings (member check). Although the latter is not without fault, it can "decrease the incidence of incorrect data

and the incorrect interpretation of data" (Harper and Cole 2012, p. 2), mostly when non-research interests (e.g., self-presentation, politics) are low, and in this way promote rigor in the creation of meaning (Morrow 2005).

Another criterion of positivist rigor in qualitative research suggested in the literature is replication. Sobh and Perry (2006) explained that data that emerged from different units of analysis demonstrate replication. The authors disclosed that qualitative research relied partly on the researcher's active choice of units of analysis, often based on expectations of similarities or differences between the outcomes. Based on Yin's (1994) work, Sobh and Perry (2006) argued that discovering similar results between units that were predicated in advance fosters "literal replication," whereas discovering contradictory results between units that were predicated in advance fosters "theoretical replication."

4.3 Positivist generalization

Positivist generalization has several characteristics: (a) it involves producing general and abstract statements; (b) it involves statements that are moderate, as they aim to represent the shared experience of the social world and yet avoid being sweeping; and (c) it often offers instrumental insights that can be used in social practice. Generalization is about "extrapolation" (Firestone 1993, p. 22), and involves "drawing broad conclusions from particular instances" (Polit and Beck 2010, p. 1451). Many if not all qualitative studies contain an inherent paradox with regard to generalization, as they "focus on the particular" and at the same time are interested in "the general and abstract" (Polit and Beck 2010, p. 1452). In positivist qualitative research, however, because of the roots of the approach, a decision is made in favor of "the general and abstract" implications of the study. This often takes the form of inferential generalization. Lewis and Ritchie (2003) described "inferential generalization" as dealing with "the question of whether the findings from a particular study can be generalised, or inferred, to other settings or contexts beyond the sampled one" (p. 264). They suggested that this was an independent type of generalization, different from "representational generalization," attempting to extrapolate from the population of the sample or from "generalization by case-to-case translation" (Firestone 1993).

Positivist generalization is usually a "moderatum generalization." Payne and Williams (2005) suggest the such generalization aims to describe the "wider range of people" (p. 311), and it is linked with the researchers' aspiration to generate "pragmatic generalizations" that bring order and consistency to social interaction (p. 296). In positivist qualitative research, only meanings that are relevant in external reality (in the sense that they are shared and routinely used by a wide audience of researchers or practitioners) deserve attention (Sobh and Perry 2006). Scholars have suggested that some cautious causal inference is appropriate and feasible in qualitative research (Maxwell 2004). Sobh and Perry (2006) explained that "the combined effects of underlying structures and mechanisms result in patterns in experiences, but those patterns will not always occur. Thus social phenomena by their nature are fragile, so that causal impacts are not fixed but are contingent on their environment." (p. 1200). Moderatum generalization is first and foremost moderate. It avoids sweeping generalized statements that transcend time and culture. The generalization is moderately preserved, and it invites political and aesthetic changes (Payne and Williams 2005). Moderatum generalization is integrated in several variations of qualitative research. For example, it can be identified in the version of "grounded theory" developed by Glaser and colleagues (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Phenomenological research can also aim for positivist generalization. One stream of phenomenological research that aspires to it deliberately is descriptive phenomenology, which seeks to identify gestalts for specific phenomena that can be generalized (Gill 2014; Giorgi 1975).

Lastly, it has been suggested that positivist generalization is associated with applicative thinking. Schrag (1992) proactively argued that "the positivist paradigm is hard to avoid." He contended that it is impossible to avoid positivist generalization in an applied social science field because many studies are justified by their aim to affect social practice. For instance, according to Schrag, educational research usually concludes with a recommendation about "some policy, way of thinking, conceptual framework, design, strategy, or practice for intervention in the lives of children" (Schrag 1992, p. 7).

5 Toward a typology of positivist qualitative research as empirical research

As noted above, based on the analysis of the literature, I detected three emphases in positivist qualitative research: (a) positivist groundedness, (b) positivist rigor, and (c) positivist generalization. I suggest that one positivist emphasis[3] is insufficient to label a qualitative work as positivist qualitative research, and only works that include two or more positivist emphases can be classified as partially of fully positivist qualitative research. Setting the number of required emphases to two or more positivist emphases for a qualitative research to be classified as partially of fully positivist is somewhat arbitrary, but it is based on the literature and on earlier classification efforts. In typologies, a small numbers of descriptive dimensions can assist the communication of central ideas to readers, and facilitate using the typology as a pedagogical tool (Guest 2013). Three is considered to be a parsimonious and effective number of descriptive dimensions. For example, Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2009) offered three descriptive dimensions to classify mixed method designs. The positivist emphases are shown graphically in Fig. 1. The Venn diagram presentation suggests that in various qualitative works, positivist emphases can manifest in different manners, which produce four types of positivist qualitative research: (P1) partially positivist groundedness and rigor, (P2) partially positivist rigor and generalization, (P3) partially positivist generalization and groundedness, and (F) fully positivist qualitative research. Most positivist qualitative research works can be categorized as one of these four types.

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[3] Positivist-inspired notions of credibility find their way into naturalistic and ethnographic research (LeCompte and Goetz 1982; Lincoln and Guba 1985). These notions have become mainstream in qualitative research (e.g., Marshall and Rossman 2006; Miles and Huberman 2002; Patton 2002).
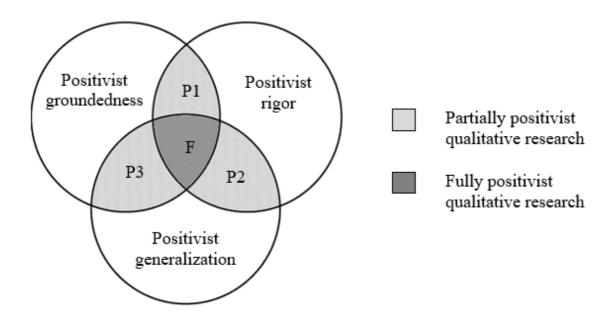
Fig. 1 Typology of positivist qualitative research

The four types outlined above form a descriptive typology designed to shed light on the type of positivist qualitative research works that can be found in the literature. Using two out of three emphases in qualifying a work as a positivist qualitative research may seem arbitrary to some critics, and may appear to be partly symptomatic of other issues. For the sake of full disclosure, I find myself in agreement with these critiques. But the consequences of the facts that the qualitative research community is not a single entity (Denzin 2009), or that researchers often situate their work in a specific paradigm and borrow elements from other discourses (Deetz 1996), reach far beyond the scope of this essay. My suggestion is to replace binary structuralism with a continuum, to indirectly ease the tensions in a diverse community having to do with the practice of borrowing and mixing elements of paradigms. Primarily, I hope that this work legitimizes various forms of positivist qualitative research in scholarly discourse, at the same time outlining guidelines that are broad enough not to become a procrustean bed.

From a holistic viewpoint, partially positivist qualitative research works are weaker than fully positivist ones, because one of the key positivist aspects of research is missing and therefore the research narrative is less developed. To address this issue, I suggest to incorporate a technical innovation in articles, in the form of a paradigmatic standpoint disclaimer. Such a disclaimer would contribute to refining

not only positivist qualitative works but also interpretative and critical qualitative works, as reflection may assist non-positivist researchers to resist pressures to adopt positivist components. Such pressures might lead to works featuring a single positivist component, such as those represented by the non-overlapping sections in Fig. 1.

6 The need for a paradigmatic standpoint disclaimer

The polylithic perspective of paradigms that acknowledges the existence of loosely connected components does not take away from the basic function of epistemic thinking in cognitive processing and comprehension of ideas (Barzilai and Eshet-Alkalai 2015), nor does it take away from the aesthetic value and scientific effect of a coherent research narrative. It is necessary, therefore, to promote the paradigmatic awareness by authors of their works, and by readers of the studies they encounter.

The idea that authors need to reflect on their paradigmatic roots may sound naïve, but it is not new. For example, Marshall and Rossman (2006) argued that paradigmatic reflection is fundamental to promoting "epistemological integrity" and maintaining connections between research strategy, question design, and methods. The literature suggests that it is possible to examine researchers' paradigmatic thinking in several ways. One approach is to explore how a researcher represents paradigmatic constructions from the perspective of an external observer (Johnson and Cassell 2001). For example, Gringeri, Barusch, and Cambron (2013) used four epistemological markers to map published qualitative studies in social work. Another approach is to provide opportunities for individuals to create accounts of the particular discourses on which researchers based their work (Johnson and Cassell 2001). I prefer to encourage the latter approach, of intrinsic engagement, because if it is performed in the course of the research process it can have a transformative effect on the research itself and on its quality.

In this regard, Johnson and Cassell (2001, p. 127) argued that "[b]y seeking to explain ourselves as knowers, by telling us how we ought to arrive at our beliefs, epistemology is pivotal to science." Similarly, Morgan and Smircich (1980) claimed that social science "would be better served if researchers were more explicit about the nature of the beliefs they bring to their subject of study" (p. 499). They further argue that there is "a need to approach discussions of methodology in a way that highlights the vital link between theory and method—between the world view to which the

researcher subscribes, the type of research question posed, and the technique that is to be adopted as a basis for research" (Morgan and Smircich 1980, p. 499).

Although reflexivity is frequently included in qualitative research works, its popular application is narrow and technical. Macbeth (2001) argued that currently much of the discussion on reflexivity in qualitative research focuses on "positional reflexivity" that involves the self-examination by researchers of where they are situated (e.g., personal biography, location, etc.) with respect to the analytic procedure. Such reflexivity is often used to communicate the researchers' "vigilance for unseen, privileged, or, worse, exploitative relationships" with the participants (Macbeth 2001, p. 38). I recommend moving from such benign introspection (i.e., thinking about one's use of research methods) to a more advanced form of constitutive reflexivity (i.e., thinking about the implications of one's paradigmatic assumptions in knowledge production) (Woolgar 1988). Constitutive reflexivity addresses the link between what is presented and the manner in which it is presented, and therefore requires reflecting directly on one's sense-making.

Constitutive reflexivity is particularly important in research on social issues because social issues have a "sprawling nature," among others, and they involve a wide range of intertwined factors (Head and Alford 2015). The integration of a section devoted to constitutive reflexivity in articles can contribute to the advancement of science because "[m]uch of the debate and criticism over methodology involves researchers who are failing to communicate with one another because they hold varying basic assumptions about their subject. When the varying assumptions become explicit, less effort can be devoted to arguing about the relative superiority of this method over that, and greater effort devoted to more basic issues" (Morgan and Smircich 1980, p. 499).

The current conventional presentation of social science qualitative research lacks the researchers' paradigmatic standpoint, which is often lost in the writing. A paradigmatic standpoint sub-section would allow researchers to reflect on their ontological and epistemological positions, and it would enhance the quality of the discourse both within the scholarly community and between scholars and practitioners. A paradigmatic standpoint sub-section, included in the methods section of the article, would efficiently communicate these aspects.

A paradigmatic standpoint statement (e.g., Fig. 2) would provide insight into (a) the researchers' basic beliefs about the world and about people's place in it, and (b) the manner in which these beliefs affected the empirical research process at hand. The example below demonstrates how a short paradigmatic standpoint sub-section can help provide the necessary information and provide readers with access to the researchers' basic beliefs and their effect on the study.

Paradigmatic Standpoint Disclaimer

In this work, I adopt positivism as a paradigm of qualitative inquiry, presuming shared understandings and interpretations of the phenomenon of interest. My research is grounded in self-determination theory, which argues that all humans share basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and aspire to fulfill them. To use the theory as an analytic lens for investigating the effect of B.Ed. student teachers' motivations on their classroom practices, I used interviews with multiple sources (i.e., 16 student teachers, their mentors in schools, and their pupils in schools), triangulation (i.e., interviews, observations, and student teachers' online journals), as well as peer confirmation of analysis. Differences in schooling context did not play a large role in the findings that emerged. I therefore interpret the findings concerning the links between student teachers' psychological needs and their classroom practices as portraying a common picture, relevant to many student teachers.

Fig. 2 Example of paradigmatic standpoint disclaimer

Situating a scholarly contribution within the framework of given ontological and epistemological positions is not easy, and some authors may find it undesirable. Some may find it the equivalent of explaining a joke or a work of art. Although academic writing is also partly about the delivery and devices used to communicate the message, it should not be about testing the epistemological understanding academic and non-academic audiences. Undoubtedly, the challenge of producing a paradigmatic disclaimer is much more difficult in collective research endeavors. To truly combine the knowledge, often tacit, of several individuals, a meaningful shared experience must be promoted through frequent and deep interactions (Polanyi 1966) during all stages of the research process.

7 Conclusion

Acknowledging positivist qualitative research as a unique and legitimate form of qualitative research can enhance the quality of qualitative works in social science. Such acknowledgement would strengthen the narrative of fully positivist qualitative research. One innovation that can assist in these efforts is incorporating a paradigmatic standpoint sub-section in qualitative articles in which researchers declare on their paradigmatic thinking. Such reflection would make researchers more aware of their assumptions and encourage them to create more coherent qualitative works, positivist and non-positivist alike.

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