

# Recommendations for Designing and Reviewing Qualitative Research in Psychology: Promoting Methodological Integrity

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The current paper presents recommendations from the *Task Force on Resources for the Publication of Qualitative Research* of the *Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology*, a section of *Division 5* of the *American Psychological Association*. This initiative was a response to concerns by authors that reviews of qualitative research articles frequently utilize inflexible sets of procedures and provide contradictory feedback when evaluating acceptability. In response, the Task Force proposes the concept of methodological integrity and recommends its evaluation via its two composite processes: (a) fidelity to the subject matter, which is the process by which researchers develop and maintain allegiance to the phenomenon under study as it is conceived within their tradition of inquiry, and (b) utility in achieving research goals, which is the process by which researchers select procedures to generate insightful findings that usefully answer their research questions. Questions that guide the evaluation of these processes, example principles, and a flowchart are provided to help authors and reviewers in the process of both research design and review. The consideration of methodological integrity examines whether the implementation of fidelity and utility function coherently together. Researchers and reviewers also examine whether methods further the research goals, are consistent with researchers' approaches to inquiry, and are tailored to the characteristics of the subject matter and investigators. This approach to evaluation encourages researchers and reviewers to shift from using standardized and decontextualized procedures as criteria for rigor toward assessing the underlying methodological bases for trustworthiness as they function within research projects.

*Keywords:* methodological integrity, qualitative methods, qualitative research, review, trustworthiness

In the discipline of psychology, qualitative research refers to methodical scientific practices aimed at producing knowledge about the nature

of experience and/or action, including social processes (e.g., Fine, 2013; Morrow, 2005; Parker, 2004; Wertz et al., 2011). These meth-

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In 2013, the *Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology* formed a Task Force on Resources for the Publication of Qualitative Research. This paper is the product of their efforts. The task force would like to thank Lisa M. Osbeck for thoughtful comments in the review process.

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ods use natural language and other descriptive and interpretive forms of human expression in their data, analysis, and findings. Qualitative research tends to centralize an iterative process in which data are analyzed and meanings generated in a fruitful, recursive manner, yielding results that gradually produce original knowledge of psychological life (e.g., Osbeck, 2014; Rennie, 2012; Wertz, 1999). In view of the pluralism of qualitative research traditions that has emerged in psychology over the years, we have attempted to develop a unified framework that can be commonly employed in the design and evaluation of this kind of research by both researchers and reviewers. This report presupposes some familiarity with and expertise in qualitative research in general and at least one specific approach. Its recommendations are not the result of a qualitative analysis nor are they summarizations of guidelines and recommendations that have been previously suggested. Rather, they are an attempt to articulate a unified set of principles concerning the scientific integrity of the many contrasting approaches and varied methods of qualitative research that are currently employed.

Although it is not possible to review their history in the present paper, descriptions of the development of qualitative research methods in human science can be traced to precursors of modern psychology, such as Wundt, Vico, Dilthey, and James (Danziger, 1990; Wertz, 2014). Scholars in psychology have been active in developing, teaching, conducting, and disseminating research using these empirical methods in recent years. There is great diversity in the goals and procedures of contemporary qualitative research (Gergen, 2014), and its fuller integration in the science literature holds great promise for both advancing psychology and educating interdisciplinary and lay audiences (Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015).

This paper is intended for readers who conduct qualitative research and for those who have sufficient knowledge to serve as reviewers or action editors of submissions for publication. It is not intended to be a justification of qualitative research, a prescriptive list of its purposes, nor a primer for basic terminology in and foundations of qualitative research (see Ponterotto, 2005b for a useful primer). Instead, we describe in the paper principles meant to advance qualitative research design and evaluation, accompa-

nied by examples, to aid researchers and reviewers in considering methods across multiple qualitative traditions.

In North American psychology journals, the publication of qualitative methods has been steadily rising (Hays, Wood, Dahl, & Kirk-Jenkins, 2016; Ponterotto, 2005a, 2005c). These methods (e.g., phenomenology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, consensual qualitative research) are coming into common practice, especially in research related to counseling, education, health, psychotherapy, and cultural studies. Still, on the whole, qualitative researchers remain a minority within psychology and face challenges in communicating and disseminating their findings, as do reviewers and editors evaluating this work.

### **Challenges for Reviewers and Journal Editors**

The process of reviewing qualitative research for publication can entail a number of complications for both reviewers and editors of psychological journals.

#### **Training in Qualitative Methods**

Graduate-level education in qualitative methods is relatively recent and still rare within American psychology. Although psychology coursework in qualitative methods is becoming more common (Ponterotto, 2005a; Rennie, 2004), it was not available when most journal editors and article reviewers were in training. As a result, reviewers with expertise in a subject area may have in-depth topical knowledge but may not be equipped to review the qualitative approach used in a submission. Even reviewers experienced with some qualitative approaches may not be familiar with many others currently in use. Although reviewers are asked to evaluate and provide recommendations on manuscripts, their limited knowledge base may foster well-intentioned but inappropriate appraisals (e.g., asking authors to include a control group or expecting all qualitative methods to use bracketing). This situation may result either in the rejection of strong work or the acceptance of weak manuscripts that might comply with methodological rules but do not enhance knowledge.

### **Diverse Goals and Approaches to Inquiry**

Qualitative research methods in psychology may be rooted within a number of philosophical approaches and methodological traditions of inquiry that have distinct goals, norms, ways of communicating, and procedures for establishing trustworthiness (Hunt, 2011). Goals may include concept clarification, theory development, hypothesis generation, promotion of social justice, social transformation, or practical applications—and necessitate the tailoring of methods to each project's particular purpose. For instance, certain methods might best bolster a systems-level inquiry when applied toward effecting social change, but different methods might be required to develop an empirically based description or theory of that same topic. Depending on their philosophical assumption, methods might be conceptualized variously and distinct sets of procedures might be valued. For instance, whereas some approaches prioritize the demonstration of reliability across investigators, others prioritize the depth of engagement of one investigator (e.g., Giorgi, 2009; Hill, 2012). Whereas some methods might describe their procedures in a list of steps laid out at the outset of projects, others view their procedures as shifting in response to developing findings (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hoshmand, 2005).

This diversity can create difficulties in the design and review process, as authors and reviewers are faced with research based upon a complex set of considerations rather than upon adherence to a single established set of procedures. For example, authors may need to consider how to adjust their qualitative methods when conducting research with new goals, philosophical assumptions, or types of participants. Similarly, reviewers may need to adjust expectations (e.g., that a priori operationalized definitions of key concepts be presented as required for hypothesis testing) to fit the goals of specific qualitative research projects (e.g., to define concepts or generate hypotheses). Action editors with a flexible understanding of the principles underlying variations in method are essential.

### **Knowing What We Do Not Know**

Given the variety of qualitative approaches and their underlying philosophical assumptions,

it is rare for editors or reviewers, even those with considerable qualitative expertise, to be knowledgeable about them all or to be able to review them all equally well. It may be challenging to identify the level of expertise needed to conduct a review. For instance, reviewers who have used one version of a design may not realize that their view of its legitimate variants is limited, which can lead to faulty recommendations (e.g., a realist vs. constructivist grounded theory study). Reviewers also may not know what design is used in a submission until they agree to conduct the review and then may feel obliged to complete the review, even when they are not firmly grounded in its approach.

### **Knowing Whom to Trust**

Editors often are presented with conflicts in reviews that can be traced to varying levels of expertise among reviewers. For example, one reviewer who is skilled in qualitative research design may have only minor concerns that are drowned out by stronger inaccurate criticisms of reviewers who are less familiar with these methods. That reviewer may make recommendations (e.g., the use of a hierarchy of findings) that do not fit with the design in manuscript being reviewed (e.g., a discourse analysis). It can be challenging for editors to know whose review to prioritize, whether additional reviews are necessary, and when to invite further clarifying conversation between reviewers and authors.

### **Challenges for Authors**

Additional challenges to publishing qualitative research arise from the perspectives of authors preparing submissions. Journal expectations may be inconsistent or inappropriate.

### **Inconsistent Design and Review Expectations**

When authors are engaging in research design, they may be flummoxed by the multiple sets of recommendations that are tailored toward specific methods, philosophical stances, or content areas and their intersections (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Hill, 2012; Kidd & Kral, 2005). Although increasing numbers of journals publish qualitative research, there is little con-

sistency in the types of information to be included in reports. Because these expectations can differ by reviewer, it may be impossible for researchers to know what to expect, even within the same venue. For example, some reviewers seek detailed information on investigators' reflexivity (examining their own process of engagement) or ontological/epistemological framework, whereas others discourage the inclusion of this information. Authors are left uncertain and may be penalized for either inclusions or omissions.

### **Page Limits and Inappropriate Publishing Guidelines**

Authors face a difficult challenge to adhere to a journal's maximum page or word limit and include all the important information. Editors who object to dividing large qualitative studies into publishable sections may mistake this division as piecemeal publication—that is, the unnecessary division of research from one data set into separate articles. Qualitative research tends to require space not needed by quantitative studies, because its presentation often requires in-depth rationale for methodological choices, demonstrations of how the data analysis led to the findings, and natural language exposition of findings with quotations. Also, findings are often context-dependent and may require extensive descriptions of conditions and contexts in order to be intelligible. As a result, authors are in a position where they must choose to either explain their method clearly or present their results persuasively. This concern may be even more acute for mixed methods researchers, despite growing interest in funding multimethod projects by the US National Institutes of Health (<http://sigs.nih.gov/cultural/Pages/default.aspx>, November 7, 2013).

A helpful trend has begun in which some journals allow extra pages for qualitative manuscripts, ameliorating this problem to some extent. For instance, the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* permits 10 extra pages for qualitative manuscripts (shifting their page limit from 35 to 45 pages), which aids their authors in submitting research that reviewers can appropriately evaluate. The availability of the option for online supplements to an article is another useful development for qualitative researchers. Online supplements might in-

clude detailed methodological information such as complete interview protocols, recruitment scripts, comprehensive demographic information, and supporting pictures or recordings, as well as result descriptions that include more quoted material than might fit within a printed version.

### **Challenges Related to the Transition Toward Qualitative Methods**

In addition to the aforementioned advances in understanding qualitative methods, there have been some attempts to support this research in psychology that have controversial implications.

#### **Reducing Methods to Singular Variants or to Key Procedures**

To aid with the problem of reviewers' limited information about diverse qualitative methods, some journals have made available to their reviewers guidelines to enhance reviewing, including lists of key procedures associated with specific methods (Letts et al., 2007) or a list of questions (Mallinckrodt, 2010) that orient reviewers to procedures that enhance trustworthiness. Although these efforts might benefit a naïve reviewer, procedure-based evaluations of rigor tend not to invite the consideration of integrity with specific reference to investigators' research goals, approaches to inquiry, or study characteristics, which may require creative procedural innovation. Also, versions of an approach by the same name might use different procedures and terminology (cf., Braun & Clarke, 2006; Krippendorff, 2013). For instance, what leading researchers (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010; Rennie, 2000) and originators of the method (Glaser, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) each called grounded theory differs in terms of procedures, language, and philosophical frameworks, even though there are commonalities among approaches under the rubric of grounded theory (Fassinger, 2005). A procedural approach to reviewing can result in conflicting reviews, with reviewers referencing alternate variants of a qualitative research tradition. Also, it discourages the appropriate adaptation of established designs and the development of new methods (e.g., Charmaz, 2014).

### Question-Guided Versus Fixed-Procedure Research Design

Although procedurally driven descriptions of methods can be helpful primers when first learning a particular approach, the framing of qualitative methods as rigid sets of procedures can lead to the faulty assumption that a mechanical adherence to established steps is ideal. In his classic critique of psychological research practices, Bakan (1967) referred to this flaw as *methodolatry*, in which psychology was accused of idolizing adherence to fixed methods rather than flexibly utilizing methods suited to the research questions. He suggested that, instead of using methods to further inquiry, psychologists have restricted their inquiry to fit established methods. Defining rigor as adherence to rigid sets of procedures may lead to the inappropriate rejection of research when investigators have innovated or adjusted procedures in accordance with their unique subject matter, goals, research questions, and other important characteristics of their studies.

### Valuing Qualitative Methods Only When Quantified or Supplemental

Although the publication of qualitative methods in psychology is on the rise, a recent review (Eagly & Riger, 2014) of the state of feminist psychological science found that qualitative research that is not part of a mixed method design was uncommon in the high citation journals examined, with some editorial policies having *required* qualitative findings to incorporate quantification (Frieze, 2013; cf. Hesse-Biber, 2016). This state of affairs is of particular concern because the value of using qualitative methods to explore the experiences of women and other marginalized people has been compellingly established in feminist and multicultural scholarship. The review concluded that psychology pays “negligible attention to epistemology” (Eagly & Riger, 2014, p. 698), which limits the qualitative research traditions understood and accepted for publication.

The costs of these problems in the field are high. Contributing to many of these challenges are conflicting ideas on how rigor in qualitative research should be understood. Qualitative researchers receive contradictory design advice and unhelpful reviews and need to resubmit

articles repeatedly; reviewers face uncertainty when evaluating articles; and editors make decisions based upon inconsistent advice. In recognition of these multiple systemic challenges, the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology, a section of Division 5 (Quantitative and Qualitative Methods) of the American Psychological Association, formed the Task Force on Resources for Qualitative Research Publication to develop resources that could facilitate the publication of high-quality qualitative research in psychology. To advance the state of qualitative research, the task force sought to develop a unified approach to considering trustworthiness while maintaining the flexibility needed to accommodate the diversity of research approaches and their appropriate adaptation across studies.

### A Diversity of Qualitative Research Approaches and Goals

Qualitative researchers pursue a variety of research goals and often do so within diverse, established traditions. It can be challenging for authors and reviewers to understand and assess the validity of research conducted according to such distinct goals and approaches. One line of work that has been successful in raising psychologists’ awareness of the methodological pluralism of dominant qualitative traditions typifies them in categories, such as post-positivist, constructivist-interpretive, and critical-ideological paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005b). Although these categories are not inclusive of all qualitative approaches, and distinctions among ontology, epistemology, and method are not always clear (Staller, 2013), the delineation of these three traditions has supported diversity in the methods and goals of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Morgan, 2007).

Because these three paradigms are reviewed elsewhere in detail (see Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005b), we briefly describe only the central tenets of these traditions in order to encourage an appreciation of the variety of methods and goals that may be at play when designing and evaluating qualitative research. The goal of science for *post-positivist researchers* is to use an objective approach to analysis in order to proffer explanations or make predictions, while working to minimize human error and biases. *Constructivist-interpretive re-*

*searchers* seek to use dialogical exchanges with participants in order to uncover meanings that are held by sets of people or systems, while exemplifying their process of analysis in order to illustrate and make transparent their interpretive processes. For *critical-ideological* researchers, the purpose of the research may be to unmask and disrupt privilege, power, and oppression for the sake of liberation, transformation, and social change, using their perspectives overtly as a lens to guide the analysis of their data and report on their findings.

In addition to these three frameworks, there are other well established and developing approaches to qualitative research worthy of recognition. The *phenomenological* approach has a hundred-year interdisciplinary history of developing qualitative methods for the study of lived experience that include descriptive, interpretive, and narrative variants in psychology (Churchill & Wertz, 2001; Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2005, 2014). The *pragmatic* approach, which may use multiple methods to achieve practical aims, is focused on solving problems that may be defined by multiple stakeholders in order to yield consequences that serve human interests in complex institutions from education to business to psychotherapy (Fishman, 1999; Patton, 2015). These five categories of traditions are not mutually exclusive and are not meant to be exhaustive. Research practices along each of these lines are in a continual process of fluid interchange, innovation, and change. New approaches, such as the currently growing arts-based or performative inquiry (Gergen & Gergen, 2012), may rise in influence as methods evolve over time. Nevertheless, an appreciation of the distinctiveness of various goals and traditions of qualitative projects facilitates a needed understanding of diversity in both the design and the review of research.

### **Task Force Aims and Procedures**

To meet their charge to provide resources to support the design and evaluation of qualitative research, the task force developed this paper. Its purpose is to further thinking about qualitative methods by articulating a systematic methodological framework that can be useful for reviewers and authors as they design and evaluate research projects. These two processes are inevitably intertwined because the same sets of

norms concerning good scientific process are used in both designing and reviewing research. We hope to synthesize the literature on these processes and to identify central theoretical principles that can replace a cookbook approach to these tasks. We aim to develop a framework that respects the diversity and complexities of qualitative research methods (e.g., Gergen, 2014). We do not propose to replace methods themselves, close down discussion of differences among research designs, nor hinder their development by setting in place a new set of fixed procedural rules. Rather, we propose foundational principles that can complement discussions of specific research methods, promote dialogue, and support the continued evolution of qualitative methods.

The process of writing this article was characterized by theoretical collaboration across psychologists in different specialty areas (counseling, clinical, and human development) who have used a variety of qualitative methods in research on diverse topics and cultural identities. We have taken deliberate steps to avoid imposing the values and procedures associated with any one qualitative tradition or method within this work. The task force chair initially proposed a draft based upon her prior work (Levitt, 2014, 2015a, 2016a). Then, the Task Force extended the consideration of the literature on trustworthiness, and the ideas in the draft were sharpened and their relevance broadened over a 2-year period. The group project was co-constructive in nature in that writing, reviewing, and revising followed an iterative process. Input on the final document was triangulated across the writing team, independent qualitative research experts, and discussions at various conferences (Levitt, 2015b; Levitt, Bamberg, Josselson, & Wertz, 2016; Levitt, Morrow, Wertz, Motulsky, & Ponterotto, 2014; Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, & Josselson, 2015; Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Josselson, & Ponterotto, 2015) with professional audiences interested in qualitative research and then was submitted for review. As such, the authors of this report believe that its content can speak equally well across methodologies as well as to both seasoned and novice qualitative researchers and reviewers.

In the process of seeking feedback, we twice sent drafts of our paper to a group of independent qualitative researchers selected for their

expertise and leadership roles across a wide range of qualitative traditions and research foci (i.e., Valerie Futch, Michelle Fine, Mark Freeman, Marco Gemignani, Kenneth Gergen, Mary Gergen, Joseph Gone, Clara Hill, Ruthellen Josselson, Linda McMullen, and Cynthia Winston) and invited comment. At both points, the consultants' responses were considered by the task force and informed the evolving manuscript. Most of the feedback focused on challenges in articulating the ideas in the paper across a range of research traditions. The task force was careful to be attentive to this feedback, leading to revisions that made the principles more inclusive. By the second review, feedback indicated that most of the reviewers viewed the manuscript as clearer and improved in its fit with their approaches. The task force followed up in conversations when they were unsure how to address reviewers' concerns. The coauthors made changes to address the final clarification requests and came to consensus on those changes.

Because there is no common language that crosses methods and traditions, we recognize that readers may need to translate our terms into the language of their own preferred approaches, as providing terms and examples from all epistemologies and methods would be too cumbersome. For instance, "data collection" is used to refer to varied processes such as data identification, coconstruction, or fieldwork. "Analysis" encompasses processes such as coding, categorizing, or the use of reflexive self-examination by researchers. Similarly, at points the phrasing might seem too realistic for some readers or too postmodern to others. With this caveat, however, the underlying ideas presented have been found compelling by researchers across many traditions and methods.

### **A Singular Framework for Methodological Integrity**

In proposing principles concerning the design and evaluation of diverse features and processes of qualitative methods and traditions in psychology, the crucial question arises of whether qualitative approaches have a sufficiently shared basis for unitary norms. This question has been considered by Rennie (2000, 2012), Wertz (1983, 1999; Wertz et al., 2011), and Osbeck (2014). Osbeck developed the thesis that "the basic processes of selection of relevant

facts or meaning units, extraction of similarities, discrimination, arrangement, and emphasis are common across many domains of science and that these are also the basic elements of qualitative inquiry" (2014, p. 34). She argued that inferential processes, such as inductive reasoning, explanation, and model-based reasoning, are common to scientific understanding as well as the hermeneutic circle, in which there is continual reflective movement among aspects of a text and its whole.

Wertz extended a bottom-up approach, reflecting upon and then identifying the analytic procedures within phenomenological and existential inquiry (e.g., Wertz, 1983); these practices were subsequently found through the diverse history of qualitative psychoanalytic research (Wertz, 1987). Most recently, the comparative study of qualitative analysis by experts in five current approaches (phenomenology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative research, and intuitive inquiry) yielded a description of common attitudinal and analytic practices that were traced through the history of psychology in such inquirers as those of Freud, James, Flanagan, Maslow, and Kohlberg (Wertz et al., 2011). Such commonalities included open reading, empathic immersion, differentiating data units, distinguishing implicit meanings in context, identifying emergent structural patterns, modifying findings in view of counterinstances, reflexivity, and the critical evaluation of limitations. In addition to distinctive procedures developed within each tradition, multiple traditions articulated similar practices in varied terms, such as eidetic analysis by phenomenologists and the hermeneutic circle by interpretive researchers (Wertz et al., 2011).

Rennie (2012) described a cycle involving four inferential processes utilized within a number of qualitative traditions. Although his writings provide a depth of description on each process, we briefly summarize them here: (a) drawing forth meaning via the researchers' reflection on the data about what is important (eduction), (b) formulating an approximation of the inherent meaning (abduction), (c) deciding that further analysis could provide useful evidence (theorematic deduction), and (d) seeking out commonalities after adding new data to the set under consideration (induction). Depending on the approach (Rennie, 2012), qualitative researchers use these processes to move in either

direction between the analysis of portions of data or holistic experiences of phenomena. Thereby, the process of induction becomes self-correcting, and cycling among these stages gradually refines the meaning generated. This cycling eventually leads to some stability in conceptualization that signals the end of the analytic process. This four-step version of methodical hermeneutics was put forward as a justification of qualitative methods (see Levitt, Lu, Pomerville, & Surace, 2015).

Across these three attempts to compare analytic processes among research traditions, it may be of interest to future methodologists that hermeneutic processes, such as cycling between parts and the whole of a dataset, have emerged as central features. For our purposes, however, these theories of commonality provide support to pursue a singular framework for generating meaning across qualitative methods.

### **Methodological Integrity as the Basis for Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research**

Over time, criteria have been recommended for appraising rigor, or trustworthiness, in qualitative research that are congruent with particular epistemological approaches (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Morrow, 2005). In addition to these recommendations, there are a variety of excellent guidelines for conducting and reviewing qualitative research that outline desirable features of single designs (e.g., Fassinger, 2005; Fine, 2013; Gilligan, 2015; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003; Hill, 2012; Hoshmand, 2005; Kidd & Kral, 2005; Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Mattis, & Quizon, 2005; Wertz, 2005). A smaller number of papers describe procedures associated with rigor across qualitative methods (e.g., Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Letts et al., 2007; Levitt, 2014; Morrow, 2005; Parker, 2004; Stiles, 1993; Tracy, 2010; Wertz et al., 2011; Williams & Morrow, 2009).

Emerging from our consideration of this body of work, we propose an overarching concept, *methodological integrity*, as the methodological foundation of trustworthiness. Within this, we distinguish two constituents, *fidelity* and *utility*, at the core of methodological integrity. The overarching concept of integrity unites these two concepts and addresses the way they both are to be considered when selecting and evaluating methods and procedures within indi-

vidual studies. We describe these processes conceptually, rather than operationalize them in terms of procedures, as they drive the selection of specific procedures and undergird their value of specific methods and procedures (see Levitt, Neimeyer, & Williams, 2005 on the function of principles).

These three concepts—integrity and its constituent components of fidelity and utility—concern all aspects of research, including the delineation of the topic of research; the critical literature review; the research goals; the philosophical and methodological tradition employed; the formulation of questions; procedures such as researcher reflexivity, participant selection, data collection, and analytic steps; the articulation of study implications, the audience, and report presentation. Here, however, we focus on research constituents of prime concern to evaluation and design—data collection and analysis.

**Methodological integrity.** Trustworthiness is a term that has been used across qualitative traditions and epistemologies to indicate the evaluation of the worthiness of research and whether the claims made are warranted, whereas other terms such as credibility and validity have been associated with specific perspectives (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Whereas the term *trustworthiness* describes the degree to which researchers and readers are convinced that a research study has captured a significant experience or process related to their topic (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Morrow, 2005), we use the term *integrity* to specify the methodological basis of that confidence. It is distinct from elements of trustworthiness that are not based upon method (e.g., reputation of authors, aesthetic elements of presentation, convergence of findings with readers' prior experiences and expectations).

Integrity is the aim of making decisions that best support the application of methods, as evaluated in relation to the following qualities of each study. Integrity is established when *research designs* and *procedures* (e.g., autoethnography, discursive analysis) support the *research goals* (i.e., the research problems/questions); respect the researcher's *approaches to inquiry* (i.e., research traditions sometimes described as world views, paradigms, or philosophical/epistemological assumptions); and are tailored for *fundamental characteristics of the*



*subject matter and the investigators.* Relevant characteristics related to the subject matter include both its qualities and the qualities of the research participants or data sources that influence the communication about the subject and engagement in the study (e.g., the complexity of the subject matter, verbal ability or insightfulness of data sources/participants, participants' commitment or ability to participate in research). Relevant characteristics related to the investigators include their identities, statuses, and lived experiences (i.e., whether similar or different from the topic studied) and the resources they bring to support the research and its dissemination. We propose that integrity be understood as the establishment of fidelity and utility as a functional synergy among these features of a study and with each other. This context-driven approach to design and evaluation contrasts with approaches in which methods are expected to adhere to fixed procedures. We now turn to defining the concepts of fidelity and utility and to providing examples of their function in achieving integrity.

**Fidelity to the subject matter.** We describe fidelity as an intimate connection that researchers can obtain with the phenomenon under study. Many qualitative researchers in psychology structure their data collection to capture the *Erlebnis*—the lived experience of the participants or phenomenon—reaching verisimilitude through thick description (Geertz, 1973; Ponterotto, 2006). Our recommendation is that researchers select methods to enhance fidelity, regardless of whether they view the phenomena under study as social constructions, existential givens, unmediated experiences, embodied practices, or any other kind of subject matter that may be reflected in data and analyses. That is, fidelity to the research phenomenon is not tied to any one epistemological perspective or world view.

Data may be procured by inviting participants to interview or describe their experiences, with great attention to gaining access to the often covert and internal experiences of participants that may be challenging to observe. Also common in qualitative research is the collection of discursive or observational data as a basis for the analysis of social and linguistic practices. Other times, data may be selected from existing texts or dialogical exchanges, again with attention to selecting data that have the potential to

demonstrate an aspect of experience or a process. In ethnographic research, fidelity of data is enhanced through immersion in a system or culture. Multiple expressions or portrayals of phenomena with equally high fidelity can exist because there are many ways in which the researcher can achieve authentic closeness to and intimacy with the phenomenon under study.

**Utility in achieving goals.** The second core process, utility, refers to the effectiveness of the research design and methods, and their synergistic relationship, in achieving study goals—answering questions and/or resolving problems. Our framing utility as a study's success in meeting its goals specifies the *functional referent* of the utility assessment (i.e., method as useful toward what end?), rather than identifying decontextualized procedures at specific phases of research activity. Like fidelity, the consideration of utility is at play throughout the research endeavor.

Decisions about utility are best understood within the parameters of a specific study. Researchers might determine their questions or analytic tools to enhance the ability of their findings to meet their goals. These goals can include varied aims, such as galvanizing social action, deepening understandings and descriptions, or developing hypotheses. The question is whether the research decisions enable a project to make contributions that fulfill its stated goals.

### **Guidelines for Considering Central Processes: A Framework for Understanding Integrity**

Having identified core evaluative processes, guidelines can be put forward on how best to consider these processes in data collection and analysis. The following section outlines four features of each process that can assist researchers and reviewers in considerations of research design and demonstrates how each feature can be considered in light of a study's methods, goals, inquiry traditions, and characteristics to enhance integrity (see Figure 1). We present a principle relevant to each feature in the context of a common research dilemma. These principles describe the methodological norms that underpin the design and review process and explicate the type of thinking that can aid in both qualitative design and review. Then, re-

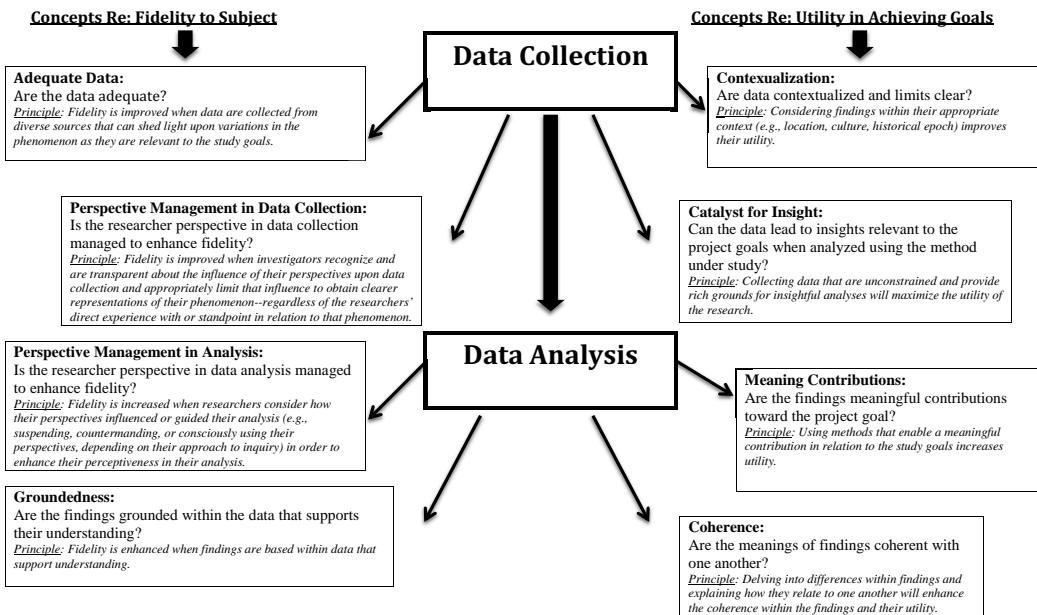


Figure 1. Flowchart to exemplify considerations of methodological integrity in research design and evaluation.

reflections upon how these principles can be applied in the design and review processes follow.

### Fidelity to the Subject Matter: Guidelines and Principles

Qualitative researchers are concerned with gathering and developing findings from data that provide a clear and vivid portrayal or excerpt of the phenomenon as it is understood within the traditions or perspectives in use (e.g., as real, interpreted, or constructed). Data may be compiled in many ways, including interviews, texts, documentation of events (e.g., media, diaries), arts-based videos/photos, participant observations, archival materials, or researchers’ reflections. In all, considering fidelity will help researchers and reviewers hold in mind the complexities and variety of the phenomena under study as well as the expressiveness of the data. Guidelines for achieving and evaluating fidelity follow, with the first two focused on data collection and the second two on the analytic process.

**Adequate data.** The principle we suggest is: Fidelity is improved when data are collected from diverse sources that can shed light upon

variations in the phenomenon as they are relevant to the study goals. With this principle, we wish to stress that, across traditions and qualitative research designs, adequacy of data refers not to a simple “magic number” of interviews or participants (Morrow, 2005). Rather, it asks researchers to consider how well they gain access to the comprehensiveness of and variations in the subject matter. Within the scope of the research question, they consider the kinds and sources of data that will allow them to meet their goals (Levitt, 2015a; Morrow, 2005). Following from this understanding, differences among sources of data (e.g., participants, texts) are seen as a strength in qualitative designs as researchers seek to develop results that are rich and encompassing. This latter consideration is particularly relevant for research goals that would be furthered by representing perspectives that might be marginalized if not deliberately integrated (Mertens, 2012).

In contrast to those quantitative studies that seek larger samples to create representative findings, qualitative studies tend to require smaller numbers of participants (with some approaches, such as autoethnography, psychobi-

ography, or case studies focusing only on one person or case); thus, adequacy of data depends not on numbers of participants, but on the quality and sufficiency of information as it provides close access to the richness of the subject matter. In other words, trustworthiness of qualitative research may not come from conducting a comprehensive mapping of variation within the *population*, but rather from selecting experiences that map the variation within a *phenomenon* (Levitt, 2016c).

***Applying this principle in research design.***

Because trustworthy qualitative analyses provide analogical accounts with enough context, description, and flexibility for readers to make judgments and apply them to a wide range of variations (Osbeck, 2014), researchers need to strategically decide which forms of variations to seek in their data collection. By consulting the research and theoretical literature, conducting initial analyses, immersing themselves in the context or culture of interest, or analyzing their direct experience with the phenomenon (e.g., via ethnography), researchers can become familiar with the characteristics of subject matter and how to represent diversity effectively. Diversity may be incorporated in many ways, including through the collection of data from multiple sources (e.g., texts from multiple religions), sources who have a reflective and longstanding engagement with a topic across contexts (e.g., extensive lived experiences), or sources who hold multiple viewpoints (e.g., recruiting perpetrators and victims), and may accumulate across studies (e.g., with case studies building upon prior work).

Researchers are not expected to collect data from participants with every form of diversity; instead, forms of diversity should be considered in relation to the study goal. For instance, in research on psychotherapy, researchers might centralize diversity in psychotherapy orientation; however, in a study on sexuality, researchers might prioritize diversity in sexual orientation. In other work, the most relevant variety of diversity might be across forms of a phenomenon (e.g., different contexts or types of an experience) rather than a demographic characteristic of participants. Although considering how cultural factors may influence a phenomenon is strongly advised, simply expecting that all qualitative studies include data sources across all demographic variables may be neither realistic

nor beneficial. Instead, developing a rationale for the types of diversity sought in relation to the research question can help researchers meet their project goals.

***Applying this principle in research review.***

The proposed principle can assist in the evaluation of adequacy of data. Reviewers will want to keep in mind that the number of participants by itself is not the criterion of adequacy for most qualitative analyses (Morrow, 2005) and instead to consider the sources of data in relation to the most important forms of diversity and the purposes and claims made. For instance, if in a paper on the psychological experience of recovery from hysterectomies the researchers have interviewed only patients who have had this surgery because of a cancer diagnosis, rather than for other reasons (e.g., sex reassignment surgery), the reviewer might suggest that the authors either broaden their data collection or narrow the scope of their paper, because their data collection would be inadequate to address the experiences of hysterectomy broadly. In reviewing a study with smaller numbers of participants (or a single participant), as described in the previous section for authors, a reviewer would consider if the study has captured diversity within the experience of the phenomenon so that the understanding has fidelity in relation to the question posed. Even if the diversity within a study is extremely limited, as in a case study, research can have adequate fidelity by adding a new perspective to the literature. For instance, a paper on African American men's experiences of a disability may select sources solely from that one identity group but may contribute a new understanding to the literature, improving its fidelity.

***Perspective management in data collection.***

The proposed principle is: Fidelity is improved when investigators recognize and are transparent about the influence of their perspectives upon data collection and appropriately limit that influence to obtain clearer representations of their phenomenon—regardless of the researchers' direct experience with or standpoint in relation to that phenomenon. This principle recognizes that investigators have perspectives and life experiences that can influence their research process and which may be similar (e.g., as a member of the group that she or he is researching) or dissimilar to the participants or viewpoints they investigate. In either case, qualita-

tive researchers who recognize and evaluate their impact upon data collection can maximize fidelity and assist readers in understanding the influence of the researchers' perspectives upon the data. Although the strategies of inquiry (e.g., types of participants selected, topic of inquiry) may be influenced by their values, questions, and methods, researchers should not engage in data collection seeking only to confirm their own perspectives but instead strive to be open to all responses—even when they plan to use a certain perspective (e.g., critical analysis) to guide their analysis.

***Applying this principle in research design.***

Researchers often use reflective strategies that structure the examination and limit the effects of their perspectives upon the data collected. Procedures developed in qualitative traditions include the use of bracketing (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2005), in which researchers set aside ideas that might interfere with or inappropriately guide data collection. In addition, reflexive journaling or memoing can help researchers identify their assumptions and the ways they might influence the data, even when researchers do not believe that they can completely eliminate the effects of these assumptions (i.e., “fallible bracketing”; Rennie, 2000). Interview-related strategies to manage researchers' perspectives include seeking a wide range of data, using nonleading language when asking questions, using open-ended questions, and closely following the interviewee (Josselson, 2013); asking participants to consider what has not been asked (Levitt, 2015a); considering how the relational dynamics between the interviewer and participant impact the quality of data constructed (Gilligan, 2015; Josselson, 2013; Polkinghorne, 2005; Rogers, 2000); or strategically using leading questions to check the reliability of answers or verify interviewers' interpretations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

***Applying this principle in research review.***

In examining a manuscript, a reviewer would seek evidence that authors considered how their own values and experiences might have influenced the data collection process. A challenge in reviewing articles is that, although the disclosure of researchers' perspectives rhetorically strengthens qualitative research, it is not yet mainstream practice. As a result, authors often are unsure how much detail is desired by particular journals. Reviewers should expect to

provide guidance to authors in this respect. Reflexivity and the use of reflective strategies in reports of data collection strengthens fidelity by allowing readers to see how authors obtained a picture of their phenomenon while restricting the influence of their own perspectives.

***Perspective management in data analysis.***

The principle is: Fidelity is increased when researchers consider how their perspectives influenced or guided their analysis (e.g., suspending, countermanding, or consciously using their perspectives, depending on their approach to inquiry) to enhance their perceptiveness in their analysis. Within the process of qualitative analysis (as opposed to data collection), researchers tend to use two main strategies to manage their own perspectives and preserve fidelity. In the first approach, researchers act to limit the effects of their prior knowledge and theories upon the analysis by developing self-awareness and acting to suspend or challenge these prior conceptions, such as in phenomenological, grounded theory, and participatory action research investigations (Giorgi, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kidd & Kral, 2005). These approaches orient the researcher to better draw forth understandings that are presented in the data and might be obstructed by the researchers' perspectives. A second approach is for investigators to use theoretical frameworks as the vehicle for their analysis—such as when using feminist, multicultural, and critical lenses to analyze data (Fine, 2013; Gilligan, 2015). These approaches permit researchers to observe dynamics that are marginalized, inaccessible to participants, or that are masked within dominant narratives. In either case, interrogating the ways in which researchers' perspectives influence their analyses and taking steps to sharpen their perspicacity increases fidelity (Rennie, 1995).

***Applying this principle in research design.***

Strategies for managing researchers' perspectives exist within many inquiry traditions and may include independent coders, self-reflective journaling, dialogue with participants, or application of a critical perspective. Other strategies include engaging multiple investigators, participants, or third parties in cogenerating research findings (e.g., Fine, 2013), using consensus methods (e.g., Hill, 2012), or seeking feedback on findings via participant checks (e.g., Morrow, 2005). For instance, a critical researcher would use dialogue with participants through

the process of shaping the results to sharpen their sensitivity to how racism is unfolding within an institution. A grounded theory researcher would use memoing to become aware of and to limit how the researcher's perspectives might narrow the analytic lens. A consensual qualitative researcher would use one or more auditors to provide feedback on preliminary results. A qualitative researcher using the voice-centered relational method would read for and write reflections on the relational dynamics within the interview (e.g., Motulsky, 2010). All these processes are tools to augment and deepen the understandings that are forthcoming from an analysis.

***Applying this principle in research review.***

To provide an example of how reviewers can use this principle in evaluating papers, if researchers collected feedback from research participants or stakeholders, reviewers can consider how differing opinions were weighed in relation to both the acuity and vantage points of the parties. Typically, researcher interpretations have priority over participants' or third parties' feedback on findings, as researchers' perspectives are based upon the analysis of all the research data (Rennie, 1995; Wertz et al., 2011). Although participants have greater expertise on their own experience, the researcher can consider data that reaches across experiences. Reviewers can consider how feedback was used in relation to these perspectives in order to deepen understanding (Levitt, 2016c). This privileging can vary in relation to the goals of a project however. For example, if participants in a participatory action project do not find the findings compelling, an ensuing project may fail.

**Groundedness.** For this feature of fidelity, the principle is: Fidelity is enhanced when findings are based within data that support understanding. Groundedness refers to the degree to which the meanings identified in the analysis are rooted in data of good quality. To demonstrate this quality, qualitative researchers tend to explicate the process of deriving their results, often supported by rich exemplars from the data (e.g., quotes, images, text) to an extent that allows the reader to judge the fidelity of the analysis. Evocative, creative, and aesthetically compelling writing can aid in this process (Freeman, 2014).

***Applying this principle in research design.*** Strategies for establishing groundedness may

differ across inquiry approaches, methods, research goals, and study characteristics. Although researchers may adopt analytic strategies in keeping with their traditions, the results will clearly show, in a balance of interpretive commentary and supporting evidence, the links across data, analysis, and results. A few examples from many possible strategies include a constructivist investigator making extensive use of self-reflection to ensure that the results are grounded in the data, a team that is influenced by post-positivist ideals using interrater reliability calculations to enhance the reliability of their analysis, or critical researchers engaging in a process of coanalysis with participants for the coconstruction of meanings that retain fidelity to their life contexts.

***Applying this principle in research review.***

In assessing groundedness in a paper, reviewers should be convinced both that the findings are based upon the data and that the data are rich enough to support the findings. The thick description provided should go beyond superficial facts or confirmation of the finding (Ponterotto, 2006). For instance, the quote, "Chocolate relieves my stress" would be a poor quote for the theme, "Indulgence relieves stress," even though it replicates the finding, as it does not suggest that the finding was rooted in a deep understanding. A better quote would be,

Because the medical treatment felt like an undeserved punishment, I felt a need to indulge myself afterward with chocolate and do something to correct what was happening to my body. It was a way of protesting the treatment and valuing my own needs.

Reviewers should feel that the quoted material not only supports the finding but also vivifies the emotional/relational experience and deepens the contextual or historical understanding.

**Utility in Achieving Goals: Guidelines and Principles**

We propose that the appropriateness of the data collection and analytic procedures selected can be evaluated by whether they usefully allow a study to meet its aims. Utility is maximized by selecting a process of analysis that organizes data so that some aspects become more central in response to the research question. Many qualitative methods provide guidance to structure this process and suggest procedures such as changing description into psychological lan-

guage (Giorgi, 2009); employing a coding scheme to develop a conceptual model or a theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010; Glaser & Strauss, 1967); or applying an interpretative framework, such as analytic interpretation (Wertz, 1987) or a voice-centered relational model (Gilligan, 2015; Motulsky, 2010). The following guidelines can be used to evaluate a study's utility in achieving goals, with the first two focused more within data collection and the second two within the analytic process.

**Contextualization of data.** The principle for this feature of utility is: Considering findings within their appropriate context (e.g., location, culture, historical epoch) improves their utility. Researchers must convey sufficient information regarding the history, the setting, the participants, and the researchers themselves so that the reader can understand features of the context that might influence the findings (Morrow & Smith, 2000; Rogers, 2000).

**Applying this principle in research design.** Considering information that contextualizes data throughout the analysis can allow researchers to be attuned to variations in the settings of a finding and lead to more useful findings. Strategies used in this process may include a historical account of the phenomenon or community under study, the consideration of demographic data, details about the participants' or researchers' experiences with the phenomenon, or the use of research or clinical measures to situate the participants in relation to a characteristic of interest. Identifying patterns that appear to be context-bound will enhance the utility of the findings.

**Applying this principle in research review.** Within a manuscript, the reviewer should expect to find information that frames the findings within the context of the specific study and makes sense of variations in findings. This contextual information will situate the data collected so that findings can be usefully evaluated and applied in a context-sensitive manner. For example, a finding may be found to be robust within a certain location (e.g., a dominant discourse was supported by a dominant group and in its contexts) but to differ in a second location in relation to a characteristic of a second group (e.g., the discourse was problematized by marginalized groups and in their contexts). Clear statements about setting, culture, and time period in relation to variations in the findings

permit the appropriate transferability of findings across contexts and enable the understanding of how findings might answer related questions.

**Catalyst for insight.** We have generated the following principle that considers the potential for the data to support perceptive analysis: Collecting data that provide rich grounds for insightful analyses will maximize the utility of the research. Throughout the data collection (e.g., selecting archives or data excerpts, identifying participants, interviewing), methods should be selected and implemented to enhance the potential for insight to be derived from the data.

**Applying this principle in research design.** As they begin the design process, it will advantage researchers to consider how best to identify or generate data that can support insightful analysis given their perspectives, skills, and positions. For instance, it may be that certain study personnel with specific training or understanding (e.g., knowledge, interview skills, shared experiences), access to data (e.g., proximity to data source), or interpersonal relationships (e.g., in-group membership) are better able to collect data. To provide an example, interviewers' status or perceived privilege may negatively influence their ability to elicit generative responses and may reduce participants' willingness to disclose insightful data. Or, the ways that investigators prepare for and present within the interview context may be varied to support confidence (e.g., emphasizing professional credentials, making shared values overt) or enhance relational interviewing skills (Josselson, 2013). Interviewers will want to ask questions that demonstrate sensitivity, clarify issues of uncertainty, and lead to innovative responses. Qualities that support collection in one study might impair it within another, so this feature should be considered in relation to each study's attributes.

**Applying this principle in research review.** Reviewers will consider whether the data collected appear to contain insight into the phenomenon under study. If the data presented do not appear to support insightful findings, reviewers can consider whether the data sources were unable to provide insight (e.g., studies that ask about experiences that participants have not had) or were constrained by the interpersonal dynamic (e.g., responding under duress). Typically, there are two ways that qualitative data

lead to innovation. Data can enable deep understandings that evocatively draw out aspects of a phenomenon that have not been considered previously. Alternately, the data collected may bring a wider systemic analysis to bear upon the understanding of a topic and place into play new considerations of the interactions of social and personal processes. These functions can be combined to enhance the utility of the findings.

**Meaningful contributions.** Complementing the focus on insight within data collection, researchers work to draw forth and shape the insights afforded by the data so that findings will be meaningful in addressing the analytic goals. The principle for this feature is: Using methods that enable a meaningful contribution in relation to the study goals increases utility. Meaningful contributions can take many forms (e.g., new theories, social change). For example, replication studies may have utility when there are questions about earlier findings, when converging methods help establish emerging findings, or when a new context is under exploration.

**Applying this principle in research design.** There are many ways in which researchers can enhance the meaningfulness of their studies, including forming questions that augment or challenge current representations of a phenomenon in the literature, selecting methods that can best expand prevalent understandings, and demonstrating the ability of findings to solve problems posed in their research (e.g., ability to prompt institutional change). Researchers may perform checks on their analyses (e.g., seeking feedback on findings) to see whether the meanings generated have shed a new light on a phenomenon for readers, stakeholders, or the participants. Checks on the meanings generated in the findings, if used, should be coherent with the goals of research, the approach to inquiry, and research study characteristics. For instance, requiring feedback from participants may not facilitate the research goals when the researchers are using a theoretical lens in their analysis that the participants do not share (e.g., a study on racist sentiments embedded within the speeches of anti-immigration politicians) or when working with transient participants who are unavailable for comment (e.g., homeless youth).

**Applying this principle in research review.** In the review process, meaning contributions should be evaluated with respect to the research

goals as well; meanings generated can serve many functions such as theory development, deepening understandings, generating questions, clinical guidance, or social change. If results within a paper appear shallow and do not further the dominant understandings, reviewers could ask authors to make clearer the contributions or reject a paper. If a study's goals are met, reviewers may still need to determine whether those goals are relevant to a journal's audience or mission—not as an issue of methodological integrity but as an issue of fit. For example, a paper might produce contributions of import about its subject matter but not hold relevance for a journal that is focused upon methodological contributions.

**Coherence among findings.** This principle can aid considerations of inconsistent findings: *Delving into differences within findings and explaining how they relate to one another will enhance the coherence within the findings and their utility.* The findings developed in the analysis should make sense in relation to one another. When contradictions exist in the data, these should be explained so that the readers can understand their basis and function.

**Applying this principle in research design.** Strategies used by researchers to increase internal consistency among findings include the use of models or diagrams to show how findings relate to one another. Narratives or artistic representations also may be used to create prototypical stories, poems, or voices that convey the complexity of a phenomenon (Gilligan, 2015; Hoshmand, 2005; Motulsky, 2010). During the analysis, researchers may return to the field for additional data or reanalyze existing data to develop coherence. Highlighting contradictions and portraying them in context or seeking out alternate or discrepant meanings also enhances coherence (Morrow, 2005). For instance, researchers might identify clinical decisional points and provide principles that guide therapists to follow different routes (e.g., Levitt & Williams, 2010).

**Applying this principle in research review.** In the process of review, a reviewer can request that the author assist the reader in making sense of discrepant findings and how to use them. If the contradictions within central findings remain unaddressed, this would post a serious limitation to the study's utility. Reviewers may suggest that researchers articulate qualifications

of findings that might reconcile them (e.g., indicating when certain findings do or do not hold, whether one finding is dominant with specific exceptions, or if there are underlying factors that can be brought to bear upon findings). By providing this advice, reviewers can serve a mentoring function that supports authors to improve the utility of their work.

**Methodological integrity revisited.** In summary, the Task Force recommends that integrity be understood as the *methodological foundation* of trustworthiness. It may be assessed by considering the criteria of both fidelity and utility in relation to a study's research methods, goals, approaches to inquiry, and the characteristics of the subject matter and investigators. Neither a study that represents its subject well but fails to usefully address its research goals nor a study that contributes a possible solution but misrepresents its subject can be considered trustworthy. The concepts of fidelity to subject and utility in achieving goals are intertwined (e.g., findings are less likely to be useful if they do not demonstrate fidelity); however, they are not redundant (e.g., research can have fidelity but not be useful in answering a question). The principles presented exemplify design considerations and appraisals of how well a given study demonstrates these qualities.

These recommendations do not specify procedural definitions or cut-off points for each appraisal, but rather the conceptual questions that would need to be satisfactorily met in the eyes of the author or evaluator. Like trustworthiness, methodological integrity remains a matter of interpretation, and we remain wary of framing our recommendations procedurally for the reasons already detailed. Although compromises may sometimes be necessary, an evaluation would look for adequacy across these features in relation to the problem at hand (see the questions posed in Figure 1). Paramount in the conceptualization of methodological integrity is that methods are synergistic: for instance, the data collection method should work well with the characteristics of the participants to enhance the fidelity and utility of a study (e.g., with children, observing play and art work may provide revelatory data that generates new insights). To be clear, we are not arguing that every researcher's goals should be seen as a fit for every journal, but that methodological integ-

ity should be assessed in relation to the goals and features of each study.

Although they often are intermingled, explicating the functions of fidelity, utility, and integrity within the study design can help researchers to design and report their studies and reviewers to differentiate their thinking when evaluating studies. These recommendations are intended to augment the value of learning the distinctive procedures of various methods (e.g., theme analysis, conversational analysis, grounded theory) by considering the logic of study design when adapting them for use within specific individual studies or when reviewing qualitative research.

As described previously, this paper builds from the existing corpus of psychological writing on guidelines for qualitative research (e.g., Elliott et al., 1999; Stiles, 1993). Although overlap exists in the concepts being proposed, the current paper organizes and condenses the various recommendations into a framework that emphasizes their conceptual underpinnings. Importantly, this conceptual frame can replace fixed procedure-bound checklist evaluations by providing a flexible approach for grounding the assessment of trustworthiness across qualitative methods within the logic underpinning research design in these approaches. They provide a relatively straightforward schema for understanding the concepts driving design and review.

### **Recommendations for Journal Editors and Editorial Boards**

Until now, recommendations have been proposed to inform researchers and reviewers. In this section, editors are presented with suggestions to best support their implementation:

1. Editors are encouraged to communicate to reviewers that applying evaluative criteria rooted in a philosophical tradition different from the research in question is inappropriate, unless the journal is explicitly committed to that tradition. For example, although a reviewer might request interrater reliability ratings in reviewing a post-positivist content analysis, it would not make sense for a phenomenological analysis. Within the former method, researchers tend to prioritize agreement from multiple perspectives in seeking an objective



description of a phenomenon, but the latter approach tends to prioritize the in-depth understanding developed from intensive analysis. Understanding how the approaches to inquiry view both the nature of the phenomenon they study and their methods will enhance the appropriateness of review recommendations (e.g., Morrow, 2005).

2. It is impossible for any editor to have a depth of knowledge in all research traditions. Qualitative action editors with expertise across qualitative methods, however, can be effective in selecting reviewers and differentiating between good and poor reviews. These action editors may be better able to determine appropriate reviewers, weigh conflicting reviews, and to make suggestions that are aligned with the research design in use.
3. Editors are encouraged to extend page limits so that qualitative researchers can describe their methods as well as present and contextualize findings adequately. An extension of 10 pages or more would be ideal, but this determination should be made in reference to the journal's style, existing page limits, and desire to have the methodological details and results descriptions that would support the paper's appraisal by both reviewers and readers. If an extension for the print version is not possible, editors could request, postacceptance, that authors place detailed method or results sections in online supplements or online versions of an article and then provide guidance on what information to delete from the print version. Otherwise, reviewers may expect submissions to conform to guidelines that were meant to support the reporting of quantitative articles but are inadequate for reporting qualitative studies.
4. Given that it may be impossible for authors to predict the level at which methodological details are desired, we encourage editors to invite authors to respond to reviews seeking greater methodological detail, especially when reviews are mixed. Qualitative researchers may be glad to provide further detail and may have withheld information in an effort to reduce their page numbers.
5. Within their instructions to authors and reviewers, editors can promote considerations

of methodological integrity as a basis of evaluation. This recommendation can discourage reviewers from using checklists to evaluate methods, from inflexibly applying procedural rules from one approach to qualitative research to another, and from discouraging innovation and adaptation of methods to support rigorous study. Instead, it prompts reviewers to conduct a conceptually driven review and to tailor that review to the properties of the specific study under consideration. Editors can routinely include in their invitations to reviewers of qualitative manuscripts a link to this paper. In addition, they can include the link to an APA video on reviewing qualitative research that is based, in large, upon the current paper and that reviewers can access without charge or the requirement of APA-membership (Levitt, 2016b; <http://www.apa.org/pubs/authors/review-manuscript-ce-video.aspx>).

Although there is much variation in how journals and reviewers encourage researchers to present qualitative research, it is hoped that these recommendations will foster greater consensus and a higher caliber of qualitative research.

## Conclusion

Our task force advocates for a way to design and review qualitative research such that two processes—fidelity and utility—are used to guide both design and evaluation in conjunction with the concept of methodological integrity. A list of principles is provided to illustrate the process of thinking through integrity and a flowchart streamlines these ideas. Although these recommendations have been developed within the rhetoric of qualitative research, overlap with quantitative research exists as some principles of good science apply broadly (Osbeck, 2014).

Instead of institutionalizing rules for authors that locate trustworthiness and rigor solely within set procedures, this approach is intended to promote a process of research design and evaluation that enhances the appreciation of diversity and complexity in qualitative research as well as supports ethical standards of research (Haverkamp, 2005; Shaw, 2008). In the evaluation of fidelity to subject and utility in achiev-

ing goals, we recommend that researchers and reviewers consider the interrelation among the goals of the researchers, the approach to inquiry, the study characteristics, and the methods of analysis. Future writings on integrity can elaborate on the working of the relationships among these concepts and within research tasks, designs, and traditions. Above all, we encourage authors, reviewers, and editors to engage in discussions that support the continued development of qualitative methods, design, and review.

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