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Disentangling Paradigm and Method Can Help Bring Qualitative Research to Post-Positivist Psychology and Address the Generalizability Crisis

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Abstract

For decades, psychological research has heavily favored quantitative over qualitative methods. One reason for this imbalance is the perception that quantitative methods follow from a post-positivist paradigm, which guides mainstream psychology, whereas qualitative methods follow from a constructivist paradigm. However, methods and paradigms are independent, and embracing qualitative methods within mainstream psychology is one way of addressing the generalizability crisis.

Post-positivism, specifically scientific realism, has long been the default philosophical model for psychology (Stedman et al., 2016). As the field consolidated post-World War II, psychology associated the possibility of scientific credibility via post-positivism with the process of quantification. Rather than critically examining whether quantification is appropriate for a research question, it became the unquestionable default for the field (Tafreshi et al., 2016).

Constructivism was a philosophical and methodological response to the pairing of post-positivism with quantification. Qualitative methods, which involve reflexivity and awareness of bias, were a natural fit for the subjectivity central to constructivism. Thus, over time post-positivism became associated with quantitative methods, and constructivism with qualitative methods (Wertz, 2014), and because psychology largely rejected the subjectivity of constructivism, qualitative methods were determined to have no place within mainstream psychology.

What scientific rationale exists to shun qualitative methods? There is none. Research should be driven by well-conceptualized questions that can be addressed empirically (and yes, qualitative data are empirical), but instead mainstream psychology has prioritized the practice of quantification. This practice provides researchers with a sheen of status and opens the door to influence within society. As Yarkoni (2021) notes, if psychology is not a quantitative science, will the journalists and policymakers still come knocking? Given the state of our knowledge, perhaps they shouldn't be at all.

Beyond status, a major barrier to embracing qualitative methods in mainstream psychology is the conflation of paradigms and methods (Madill, 2015), which is perpetuated by both post-positivists and constructivists (e.g., Jackson, 2015). Indeed, nearly all discussions of qualitative analysis in psychology are situated within constructivist/critical paradigms (e.g., Gergen et al., 2015). This conflation and divide is so strong that the idea that there might be a place for qualitative methods in psychology is so laughable to the mainstream that Yarkoni had to clearly state that his proposal for greater integration of qualitative methods was sincere. We take Yarkoni's proposal seriously that qualitative methods can address the generalizability crisis, and ask the question, what would that look like within the post-positivist mainstream of psychology?

First, we must recognize how qualitative work is already pervasive. Qualitative data that are coded, quantified, and entered into statistical models are common in journals that would otherwise not publish qualitative research (e.g., McLean et al., 2020). Whereas such work may not be perceived as qualitative, per se, it rests on qualitative data and thinking, and highlights how it is not the data source that is the problem but rather the way those data are analyzed.

And yet, in other ways we have decided as a field that qualitative analysis is just fine. Discussion sections of quantitative articles represent a qualitative analysis of the statistical results, as the authors engage in interpretation and meaning-making, putting their findings in context. As Yarkoni notes, this is the type of inferential procedure that he employed in his arguments. Moreover, measurement studies often involve the identification of latent factors that account for the covariation among indicators. Those latent factors are given names that capture the variation of the indicator set, which is precisely the qualitative analytic process of identifying themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It appears that even qualitative analysis is permissible in mainstream psychology so long as we do not call too much attention to the practice, and do not engage in the intentionality and rigor of best practices in qualitative methods.

Beyond mere recognition of what we already do, there are two uses of qualitative methods that are underappreciated by post-positivist psychology. Yarkoni proposed that psychology may consider focusing on description, as opposed to the strong emphasis on explanation currently in place. We wholeheartedly agree with this call (Gallagher et al. 2017), and add that qualitative methods are particularly well-suited to the task. There is a renewed interest in the critical subject of construct validity (e.g., Grahek et al., 2021), and yet what is often left overlooked is the need to properly understand the nature of the construct itself. The ongoing fracas around the construct of ego depletion is an excellent example. Despite hundreds of studies on the topic, amidst the failed replications it became clear that there was no understanding of what ego depletion even was, let alone how it was related to behavioral outcomes. Some initial qualitative work focused on understanding ego depletion, before moving directly to hypothesis testing, may have saved countless hours (cf., Scheel et al., 2020).

But the role of qualitative methods in psychology should not only be seen as a “first step” that precedes the more central quantitative methods. Qualitative methods can also play a key role in testing, applying, and exemplifying theoretical claims (Robinson & McAdams, 2015). Indeed, Shadish et al. (2002) distinguished between causal description and causal explanation, arguing that experiments in psychology primarily address the former. Generating causal explanations is a more formidable task that requires a broader set of methodological approaches, including qualitative methods.

These two uses of qualitative methods, construct development and causal explanations, make clear that qualitative methods have a place within post-positivist psychology, and belie claims that qualitative work is “not science.” Such claims stem from the conflation between paradigms and methods, and are more accurately claims about whether or not constructivism is science, which is an argument for another day.

Psychological researchers generally receive no training in philosophy of science or the paradigms and meta-theoretical models of the field. Nor do they generally receive training in qualitative or mixed methods research. Both of these emphasize reflexivity and a focus on the intense complexity of human experience. Psychology has asserted itself as a quantitative field, not through careful study of underlying assumptions and alternatives, but rather through relatively passive absorption of the intergenerational socialization around what it means to conduct serious science. This is the great irony of the various ongoing crises within psychology, including Yarkoni’s generalizability crisis: that nearly all of the positions and activities that researchers have taken up in the name of serious science are precisely what has exposed our failings.

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