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REVIEW ESSAY

What is "Qualitative" in Qualitative Research? Why the Answer Does not Matter but the Question is Important

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Abstract
What is qualitative research? Aspers and Corte (2019) make a case for a definition that they believe captures what many qualitative researchers intuitively know. Although I agree with many of the authors' points, I argue that the effort to identify what makes qualitative research qualitative requires there to be a clear single thing to define, and there is not; that confronting this fact forces their paper into a central contradiction; and that in spite of these and other problems, the paper succeeds in crystalizing questions that qualitative researchers must grapple with today. The authors' most valuable contribution may be less its definition than the issues we are forced to clarify when concluding what we think about it.

Keywords Qualitative research · Methods · Ethnography · Interviews

Aspers and Corte (2019) have struck a chord. Within a year of its publication, their paper has been cited over a hundred times. Confronting the fact that scholars have not quite agreed on what makes qualitative research "qualitative," the paper examines 89 books and articles that have tried to define the term, extracts the elements that the works have in common, drops those it deems non-essential, and offers a comprehensive definition that appears to have quieted many unsettled minds.

On first glance, one wonders why. The resulting definition reported in the abstract seems unpersuasive: "We define qualitative research as an iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied" (Aspers and Corte 2019, 139). After all, "improved understanding to the scientific community" is what *all* research aims for, as are findings that are "new" and "significant."

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But one soon comes to realize that, though its definition could have been clearer, the paper is onto something real. The authors essentially propose that what defines "qualitative research" is a process that is iterative, an attempt to create new distinctions, the ability to get close to people and their contexts, and an effort to understand meaning.[1] While a reader could take issue with one or another aspect of the authors' definition, the overall point is clear enough, and its elements are consistent with what many qualitative researchers understand as the nature of their work.

In what follows, I take up what is perhaps the logically prior question: Is producing a single definition a good idea? Aspers and Corte (2019) are surely right to argue that being clear on one's terms is important. Furthermore, they propose that offering a single definition of qualitative research will improve its quality (Aspers and Corte 2019, 141), because it will help distinguish good from bad work. Nevertheless, the field is quite diverse, and many of us consider the term "qualitative research" to be nothing more than shorthand, an ideal type describing multiple kinds of only loosely connected work, and thus a term requiring no extensive exegesis. Whether the exercise is worth the trouble remains unclear.

In the end, though I agree with many of the authors' points, I will argue (a) that the effort to identify what makes qualitative research qualitative requires there to be a clear single thing to define, and there is not; (b) that confronting this fact forces the paper into a central contradiction; (c) that even if the paper had not been so forced, it regrettably does not much help distinguish good from bad qualitative research; and (d) that in spite of these problems, the paper succeeds in crystalizing questions that qualitative researchers must grapple with today. The authors' most valuable contribution may be less its definition than the issues we are forced to clarify when concluding what we think about it.

There is No Single Entity

The initial problem is diversity. Aspers and Corte (2019) acknowledge repeatedly that researchers are doing many different things under the rubric of qualitative research. But the problem is not that the qualitative research is diverse; it is that "qualitative research" describes practices that are so fundamentally different from one another they have no necessary components.

We can see this fact, first, in how researchers have used the term "qualitative." As I have written elsewhere, "some use [it] to describe all small-sample studies, regardless of whether the analysis is formal [or quantitative], because they consider those studies to lack statistical generalizability. Others use 'qualitative' to characterize any approach in which units (such as organizations or nations), regardless of their

[1] Though the paper labels that last element is "improved understanding," I do not believe that term captures what the authors propose is distinctive. The paper later clarifies that a "hallmark of qualitative research" is understanding "in the phenomenological sense" which "requires meaning" (Aspers and Corte 2019, 154). Thus, the distinctive feature would seem to be not "improved understanding" but "a concern with meaning."

number, are analyzed as cases rather than divided into variables, such as studies of revolutions in which countries are assessed in light of their particular historical circumstances. Still others use the term to refer only to studies that rely on hermeneutic or interpretive, rather than positivistic orientations. Because of these differences, the quantitative versus qualitative opposition has been used to contrast many kinds of alternative studies: large-*n* versus small-*n*, nomothetic versus idiographic, causal versus interpretive, variable-based versus case-based, explanatory versus descriptive, probabilistic versus deterministic, and numerous others" (Small 2011, 59; citations excluded). The term "qualitative research" has referred to no single kind of work. Even works that include quantification, such as formal studies with small samples, have been called "qualitative."

Second, even if we ignored past usage of the term, we would still be forced to confront that there is not one research element but at least three, and these can be combined in many possible ways. The elements that could in theory be "qualitative" include the *type of data* (e.g., fieldnotes, interview transcripts, texts), the method of *data collection* (e.g., interviewing, participant observation), and the approach to *data analysis* (e.g., grounded theory, the hermeneutic circle). There is no necessary connection between any type of data, any approach to data collection, and any form of data analysis. For example, researchers have formalized oral histories for quantitative network analysis (Bearman and Stovel 2000), run regressions on in-depth interview data (Poehlmann et al. 2008), and produced narrative histories of longitudinal survey data (Singer et al. 1998) (for a discussion and additional examples, see Small 2011). While some kinds of analysis are impossible with some kinds of data, no kind of data, or approach to data collection, requires any kind of analysis.

Thus, quantitative researchers often do each of the things the paper calls distinctive to qualitative research: work iteratively, introduce new distinctions, get close to the data, and improve our understanding of meaning. For example, iterative work as described by the paper is what a great deal of "big data" research of the data-mining sort does (Salganik 2017). And introducing new distinctions based on data is precisely the point of quantitative cluster analysis—the categories are not determined a priori but instead are uncovered inductively. Furthermore, while getting close to the data, in the paper's sense, would not describe a demographer who downloads the NLSY and merely runs regressions, survey researchers who design and pilot their own instruments and run their own field questionnaires get as close to their data as qualitative interviewers do, and quantitative analysts who painstakingly compile their own texts from deep within library archives get equally close to their data (Parigi 2012). Finally, one can perform all of these elements of qualitative research and still produce a paper full of statistical tables and figures in which deep understanding of meaning is achieved (more on this below). For example, a rich tradition of archive-based, highly formal quantitative network analysis relies on deep immersion with text-based data, iterative movement between theory and data, and the presentation of new distinctions (e.g., Bearman and Stovel 2000; Erikson and Hamilton 2018; Padgett and Ansell 1993).

Conversely, not all qualitative researchers fulfill the purported roles in Aspers and Corte's (2019) definition. In fact, major traditions aim not to introduce new distinctions but to answer previously known questions, and work less iteratively than

deductively. An example is Edin and Lein's (1997) *Making Ends Meet*, an important and highly cited qualitative study. The authors interviewed hundreds of low-income mothers to find out how they managed to pay for expenses given their meager wages or welfare checks. The work is not iterative (in any sense deeper than all research is). To see why, consider how Aspers and Corte (2019) define that term: "The main point is that the categories that the researcher uses, and perhaps takes for granted at the beginning of the research process, usually undergo qualitative changes resulting from what is found" (Aspers and Corte 2019, 151). Edin and Lein (1997, 16) did not alter their categories; the authors were clear from the beginning on the research questions, and thus categories, that "drove [their] design". Though the interviews were inevitably open-ended, the authors ensured that the same set of questions were asked of all respondents, and they did not alter these questions over the course of the research. The work, in turn, did not introduce new theoretical distinctions. Even its core distinction—mothers on low wages vs mothers on welfare—was part of the design from the beginning. This largely deductive, question-driven approach to research is common among many in-depth interview studies seeking to contribute to policy.

Therefore, Asper and Corte's (2019) definition of "qualitative research" actually characterizes much conventionally quantitative work and excludes large bodies of conventionally qualitative work.

The Qualifier that Leads to a Contradiction

Is that a problem for the paper? It certainly seems to be. The paper asserts that there is, in fact, one core practice to define, that qualitative researchers intuitively know it, that the four elements it proposes constitute what it is, and that these elements distinguish it from quantitative research. In its introduction, the paper is unambiguous: "In practice, most active qualitative researchers working with empirical material intuitively know what is involved in doing qualitative research, yet perhaps surprisingly, a clear definition addressing its key feature is still missing" (Aspers and Corte 2019, 139). It also makes clear that research is qualitative only when its four elements are present: "only when these ideas that we present separately for analytic purposes are brought together can we speak of qualitative research" (Aspers and Corte 2019, 150). Finally, it also leaves no doubt that the elements distinguish qualitative from quantitative work. For example, it asserts that quantitative research is not iterative: "The point is that the ideal–typical quantitative process does not imply change of the data, and iteration between data, evidence, hypotheses, empirical work, and theory" (Aspers and Corte 2019, 152). Similarly, such research cannot get close to the data: "Quantitative research, we maintain, in the ideal–typical representation cannot get closer to the data" (Aspers and Corte 2019, 153). Thus, contrary to the actual diversity in the field, the paper asserts the existence of a single four-element practice that most active qualitative researchers follow and that quantitative research does not.

Nevertheless, in its conclusion, the paper *also* seems to argue the opposite, that its definition does *not* aim to either describe what interviewers and ethnographers intuitively do or distinguish qualitative from quantitative studies. It explains: "qualitative

approaches are not inherently connected with a specific method. Put differently, none of the methods that are frequently labelled 'qualitative', such as interviews or participant observation, are inherently 'qualitative'. What matters, given our definition, is whether one works qualitatively or quantitatively in the research process, until the results are produced" (Aspers and Corte 2019, 156). In addition, it stresses, contrary to the passages above, that those doing what "is often called 'quantitative research' are almost bound to make use of what we have identified as qualitative elements in any research project" (Aspers and Corte 2019, 156).[2] Now we learn that, in *any* quantitative project, scholars are nearly *bound* to use each of the four elements.

The two sets of arguments are in contradiction. The paper attempts to square this figurative circle by doing two things: One, by asserting, in the conclusion, that what is "qualitative" is not the "individual researchers, methods, projects, or works" but the process, which any researcher doing any kind of study can follow (Aspers and Corte 2019, 156). Thus, using the distinction I made earlier between types of data, methods of data collection, and approaches to data analysis, the paper's conclusion seems to be arguing that its definition of "qualitative research" refers largely to the analysis portion, which any kind of research could adopt. Two, it attempts to make sense of things by implicitly contrasting throughout the narrative the "ideal type" of quantitative work, which as we saw is the kind that "cannot" do what qualitative research can, and real quantitative work, which in practice is bound to do what they call qualitative research in "any" project.

Unfortunately, rather than resolve the contradiction these qualifiers merely take back much of what the paper has painstakingly argued. We want to grant the concluding point—with which I agree—that interviewers and ethnographers are not "inherently" tied to any one form of analysis, that they can, e.g., make distinctions or not, focus on meaning or not, analyze few cases or not, proceed inductively or not, or generally adopt any of scores of possible analytical approaches they wish to or not, in any combination. But to produce its definition, the paper, rather than allowing all these options, has taken four of them and argued that "only when … brought together can we speak of qualitative research" (Aspers and Corte 2019, 150). If fieldworkers can truly follow any process, then deciding that only these elements make work qualitative must ultimately be read as an arbitrary decision.[3] (And because it is arbitrary, it cannot be merely reflecting what qualitative researchers "intuitively know.") Similarly, we want to grant the point—with which I agree—that "quantitative research" is just an ideal type, a theoretical category that does not represent reality as it is practiced but is useful as shorthand. But if so, then "qualitative research" also is, and the four-part definition that attempted to accurately capture the diversity of real research was not necessary. (And if *neither* term is ultimately an

[2] We now understand the point in the abstract that "a qualitative dimension is present in quantitative work as well" (Aspers and Corte 2019, 139).

[3] The paper used existing studies to identify a long list of elements. However, it does not rely on them to decide *which* elements to include in its final definition.

ideal type, then the contrasts we have read throughout the paper expressly misrepresent how qualitative and quantitative research are done in practice.[4])

The paper cannot have it both ways. If the authors did not wish to limit ethnographers and interview researchers to one kind of process, then they did not need to have picked only some of these elements of the process and required them all to be included. After all, if those fieldworkers who do not follow all elements are not doing qualitative research, then what are they doing? It is certainly not *quantitative* research. Conversely, if the authors did not wish to allow just any kind of process to be called "qualitative," then they did not need to suggest that quantitative scholars running regressions could be described as doing qualitative research. Perhaps "qualitative" and "quantitative research" are best left as shorthand.

Improving Research

Nevertheless, from a pragmatic perspective, none of these problems would matter if the paper's definition ultimately improved research. Early on, the paper posed an intriguing question: "how could we evaluate qualitative research as good or not?" (Aspers and Corte 2019, 139). As noted earlier, it proposed that its definition will help do so.

Unfortunately, the paper only offers the following as an answer: "The definition can also be used to evaluate the results, given that it is a standard of evaluation, to see whether new distinctions are made and whether this improves our understanding of what is researched, in addition to the evaluation of how the research was conducted. By making what is qualitative research explicit it becomes easier to communicate findings, and it is thereby much harder to fly under the radar with substandard research since there are standards of evaluation which make it easier to separate 'good' from 'not so good' qualitative research" (Aspers and Corte 2019, 156–57; citations excluded).

There are two problems here. If the claim is that qualitative research is done well only when it has included all of the proposed elements, then the paper does not explain why lacking one or more of them necessarily makes a qualitative project a bad one. Edin and Lein (1997) does not introduce new distinctions—is it a bad qualitative research project or a good project that does qualitative research poorly? Neither conclusion seems sensible nor warranted. If the claim, instead, is that each of the elements of qualitative research must be done well, then the paper does not provide much guidance on how to determine whether a project has. For example, while we learn that making new distinctions from the data is important, we do not know, after reading the paper, how to tell whether a researcher has made the new

[4] And either both are ideal types or neither is, for one cannot convincingly contrast real practice to an imaginary and deliberately narrow ideal. Doing so would be the definition of straw-man argumentation. The paper's stated aims and its final definition make clear that, for the authors, "qualitative research" is neither mere shorthand nor an ideal type; it is a distinct, specific approach to analysis with four elements. Indeed, the term "ideal type" occurs throughout the paper, but never to describe qualitative research.

distinctions well or poorly. Is newness enough? What does a new distinction that does not improve understanding look like? We can imagine some answers. But we were hoping the paper would offer more on the assessment criteria it seemed to promise.

Conclusion

One way to assess the value of an idea is determine the extent to which it improves, serves, or helps facilitate practice, and by that criterion the author's definition would be important if it improved the practice of research. For all the reasons above, I believe *the definition* does not. Social science has produced outstanding ethnographies, interview studies, mixed methods studies, and studies that without a single statistic, calculation, regression, estimation, or quantitative inference have nonetheless improved our understanding of social phenomena—and loosely called all these studies "qualitative" as shorthand. They are inevitably a heterogeneous lot, and whether we arrive at some definition that includes some but not others will have no impact on their quality.

Nevertheless, most of the core issues Aspers and Corte (2019) have presented, including considering the value of getting closer to the empirical world, assessing the quality of new distinctions, seeking to understand meaning in greater depth, clarifying the differences between variables and cases, and examining why so many fieldworkers change their core question half-way through a study, are important to think through. Moreover, giving serious thought to the reasons a definitional project might or might not be worthwhile, regardless of one's conclusion, inevitably forces one to consider deeper questions about the nature of social scientific knowledge today, including the extent to which the old conflicts between quantitative and qualitative researchers, now largely overcome, nonetheless signaled fundamental tensions that remain unsolved. In fact, in spite of my reservations, I agreed with many of the points the authors made, and I changed my mind several times about how I assessed the bottom line. That fact itself makes clear that the authors have succeeded: in some way or other, the authors' question has to be worth asking, since if nothing else it forces the reader to think. Aspers and Corte (2019) is an excellent paper with which to disagree. And thus, though its definition may not improve research, the paper itself, by stimulating fieldworkers to think about many of the right questions, probably will.

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