

It's a New Year...So Let's Stop the Paradigm Wars

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The start of a new year prompts many academics to reflect on past achievements as well as hopes for the future. In December 2016, I was interviewed by a colleague about the nature of qualitative research; he asked me to reflect on the common questions I addressed in my 2016 Sage text *100 Questions (and Answers) About Qualitative Research* and he also asked that I give advice to students and instructors engaged in qualitative inquiry. Our discussion was an enriching and fun way to end the year and it also really got me thinking.

Over the past 15-plus years (since I completed my PhD), I have reviewed hundreds of grant applications (for funding agencies in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere) and dozens of student research proposals and final theses for undergraduate, master's, and PhD study. I have served on research ethics and research integrity committees, both at the local school/department level and on national committees. I edited *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (2008), where I worked closely with more than 240 experts to publish entries on 500 topics related to the practice of qualitative research. I have conducted workshops on qualitative research for students, academics, and industry researchers through various agencies, including the *International Institute for Qualitative Methodology's Thinking Qualitatively* series in Canada and Australia. Through all of this work, I have learned many lessons and had many opportunities to reflect on my role as a qualitative methodologist, a teacher, a supervisor, and a colleague.

So, as 1 year turns into the next, what is the central “takeaway” from my experience in reviewing, guiding, and advising students and peers? Sadly, it is that the paradigm wars are alive and well in many of our disciplines, worldwide. The paradigms that shape researchers' approaches to their work are vital for understanding the methods and techniques that shape the day-to-day work of gathering and analyzing data and disseminating results. When research paradigms differ (and, especially, when they are in conflict with one another), reviewers of research proposals and publications must consider the work

within the context of their own paradigmatic beliefs. Historically, when paradigmatic stances were seen to be incommensurable, they were referred to as “paradigm wars”; this term was coined by N. L. Gage “to characterize the adversarial character of the methodological debates that were occurring...during the final quarter of the 20th century” (Donmoyer 2008, p. 592). Although the last few decades have seen a “proliferation of paradigms within the social sciences” (Donmoyer 2008, p. 594), researchers continue to struggle with how best to fit these constructs alongside traditional and/or paradigms that are best suited to the natural and clinical sciences.

One unfortunate result of this ongoing struggle is that qualitative researchers continue to be put on the defensive when it comes to their research practices. They are asked by thesis committee members to justify their “small” sample sizes, when the paradigmatic presumption is that larger numbers of participants are needed. They are asked by grant reviewers to explain the “lack of objectivity” in their work, when the paradigmatic presumption is that subjectivity is not appropriate. They are asked by journal editors to separate their “results” from their “discussion” in writing up their results, when the paradigmatic presumption is that data can be separated from interpretation. They are asked by colleagues to collaborate, so that qualitative “pilot” data can inform the development of “more rigorous” methods, when the paradigmatic presumption is that nonqualitative data sets provide more valid and reliable findings.

Although we know that such requests may simply demonstrate our nonqualitative colleagues' general lack of awareness

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of appropriate, qualitative research practices, the continual act of justifying, defending, and explaining what we do can be a draining and tiresome exercise, at its best. At their worst, these requests may mean that excellent qualitative projects are not funded, that students are not approved to graduate, that excellent papers are not published, or that individuals are not promoted up the ranks in academe. While many of us desecrate the notion of the paradigm wars—and dismiss the simplistic notion that there is a qualitative “camp” and a quantitative camp on opposing sides of a great abyss—the casualties of this war continue to approach me at workshops, in classrooms, and in my office, looking for advice and support as they navigate the pathways to grant-writing, publishing, and career advancement. At the same time, I have witnessed the active disparaging of qualitative research practices by intelligent and accomplished (though methodologically ignorant) individuals who serve on promotion and funding panels or who review articles for journal publications. These individuals hold great power in their hands; their advice can sway the decisions of administrators, funders, and editors, particularly when qualitative researchers are not available to provide relevant expertise.

And yet the rise of “mixed methods” research demonstrates that there is an interest and a willingness to embrace varied approaches in our designs. Indeed, almost a decade ago, Donmoyer stated that talking about the purpose of the research (rather than the paradigm) “opens the door to mixing orientations when appropriate” (p. 595) and could be one way to move beyond the paradigm wars. However, given how little has changed in the last decade in many academic disciplines, I would argue that qualitative researchers need to embrace the concept of “paradigm” once more and use it to our advantage. By reclaiming our paradigmatic stance and talking with colleagues, editors, reviewers, students, and others about the nature of our work, we can (hopefully!) end the paradigm wars and work toward a new way of integrating or separating (as appropriate) those elements of our work that complement or contrast with the work of other paradigms.

One of the questions posed in my *100 Questions* book was, “What is the difference between a project designed with a qualitative ‘paradigm’ and a project designed to gather qualitative ‘data’?” Indeed, there are layers of misunderstanding behind this question that I believe continue to allow the paradigm wars to proliferate. Although some people may be truly (sadly!) antiquatitative in their orientation (believing qualitative research to be less rigorous and of little value), I believe that most people working within other paradigmatic frames of reference simply do not understand the nature of qualitative research. Therefore, they may (wrongly!) believe that providing an open-ended question at the end of a questionnaire will make the research a mixed methods study, embracing both quantitative and qualitative paradigmatic ideals. Yet nothing could be further from the truth! I state the following in my answer to the paradigm versus data question in my book:

A study that uses a qualitative paradigm is one that is designed to suit the inductive nature of qualitative research. The design of the

study is wholly qualitative . . . These projects do gather qualitative data but within the context of an overarching qualitative design, and data are presented in ways that reflect the qualitative nature of the study (such as providing lengthy quotes from participant interviews or extended excerpts drawn from a qualitative content analysis).

Qualitative data can also be gathered in quantitative studies, where the overall project design does not reflect a qualitative paradigmatic approach. Open-ended questions on a quantitative questionnaire, for example, provide qualitative data but are used in ways that suit the quantitative design of the project . . . Although these qualitative data provide a glimpse of participants’ views on a topic, they are limited in scope and do not provide the same depth of analysis as found in studies designed with a qualitative paradigm. (Given 2016, p. 13)

So, how can we stop the “paradigm wars”? We can educate research students and colleagues about the nature of the qualitative paradigm and how it influences our methods, our analyses, and our writing techniques. We can correct journal editors and reviewers when they ask for changes that do not suit the nature of the qualitative paradigm. We can challenge our peers’ critiques or dismissals (on granting panels, promotion panels, or in our academic hallways) of appropriate qualitative designs. In short, we can stand up for ourselves as qualitative paradigm experts!

However, there is one other significant step that we—and other, nonqualitative researchers—need to take. We need to stop using the term mixed method study and start talking about the design of a “mixed paradigm” study. I use a range of qualitative methodologies and methods in my interdisciplinary research, but I also incorporate quantitative designs, where appropriate. In doing so, I know that I am embracing different paradigms and I understand the limitations—and benefits—of that decision. I start with the research questions I wish to explore and then I carefully consider the paradigms, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies that will best support my investigation. I recognize that I am not expert in all approaches and I seek advice (and collaborators) from those who are expert in other paradigms. Only then do I (or we) select the methods and techniques that I (or we) will use “on the ground” to gather data. By starting with an understanding of paradigm, researchers can gain a deeper insight into the purpose and intention of the proposed design. This is my hope for this New Year—that we can move beyond the previous paradigm wars to embrace new ways of thinking and talking about our research, in future.

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