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## Is Evidence-Based Practice a Threat to the Progress of the Qualitative Community? Arguments From the Bottom of the Pyramid — [Source link](#)

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Arguments from the bottom of the pyramid**

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## **Is evidence-based practice a threat to the progress of the qualitative community?**

### **Arguments from the bottom of the pyramid**

There is no doubt that the field of qualitative inquiry has come a long way, with the last few decades marking a revolution in thinking around qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000, 2005, 2011). Even though qualitative approaches are still relatively ‘new’ in the human, health, and social sciences, over the last few decades we have seen a gradual growth and acceptance of qualitative work across disciplines and countries. As a methodological community, we have moved beyond the fight for a place for qualitative research, which is evidenced by qualitative research now being taught in many educational curricula and entire journals devoted to qualitative approaches.

Despite these great strides, we now find ourselves in an interesting position – somewhere between acceptance and promotion. While scholars have gone to great lengths to illustrate the value of qualitative research and ensure that it is well-represented in all areas of academic life, there remains a gap of equality when compared to quantitative research, which is still viewed by many as superior, specifically in applied fields such as health (Brackenbury Burroughs, & Hewitt, 2008; Estabrooks, 1998). This has become particularly true as the evidence-based movement has continued to find its way into discussions around the legitimacy of qualitative research and resulted in calls for making qualitative research ‘more scientific’ and ‘disciplined’ (Lather, 2013), which has somewhat contentiously resulted in some more positivist ways of thinking about qualitative methods (St. Pierre, in press). Against the backdrop of the evidence-based movement and emergent discussions around a new turn in qualitative inquiry (see, St. Pierre, 2011), in this paper, we argue that the evidence-based movement, particularly in medicine and health, continues to pose challenges for us as a qualitative community – challenges which we will need to grapple with in the

coming years. We begin, however, by pointing first to our rich history, as the lessons learned here can perhaps help as in our coming days.

### **Considering Our Past as We Look Toward the Future**

Certainly, *some* of the old criticisms of qualitative research as being ‘unscientific’ and having limited scope have faded in certain circles, and the efforts of those who have been integral to this should be recognized. Indeed, the progress of qualitative inquiry has a rich history, one that is far too detailed for attention in a brief paper such as this. However, it is worth noting some key areas. In sociology, for example, there has been a strong acceptance of qualitative inquiry, with many methodologies being developed. Early qualitative work tended to be ethnographic (Snape & Spencer, 2003), but more recently it has become more ambitious with a concern for theoretical problems and a desire to explain social phenomena through theoretical work (Bulmer, 1984). Like sociology, early anthropology tended to be ethnographic, but again there has been a greater development and acceptance of qualitative approaches and methods of interpretation in this field (Lambert & McKeivitt, 2002).

In other fields, perhaps the challenge has been greater. For example, in education, qualitative inquiry has been viewed with suspicion by policy makers (Wright, 2006), and in psychology, while the perceived value of qualitative work is developing (Biggerstaff, 2012), mainstream psychology continues to define itself as a ‘scientific discipline’ (Howitt, 2010), which creates challenges for those advocating and teaching qualitative approaches. However, perhaps the most compelling area infiltrated by the qualitative community is in health and medicine. There has been a strong drive for acceptance of qualitative work in health-related fields, which by their own definition are ‘scientific’ and have a particular focus on ‘outcomes’. Yet, even still, in many areas of health and medicine there is a growing affiliation with qualitative approaches. For instance, there are a range of books (see, for example, Green & Thorogood, 2013; Morse, 2012; O’Reilly & Parker, 2014) and journals

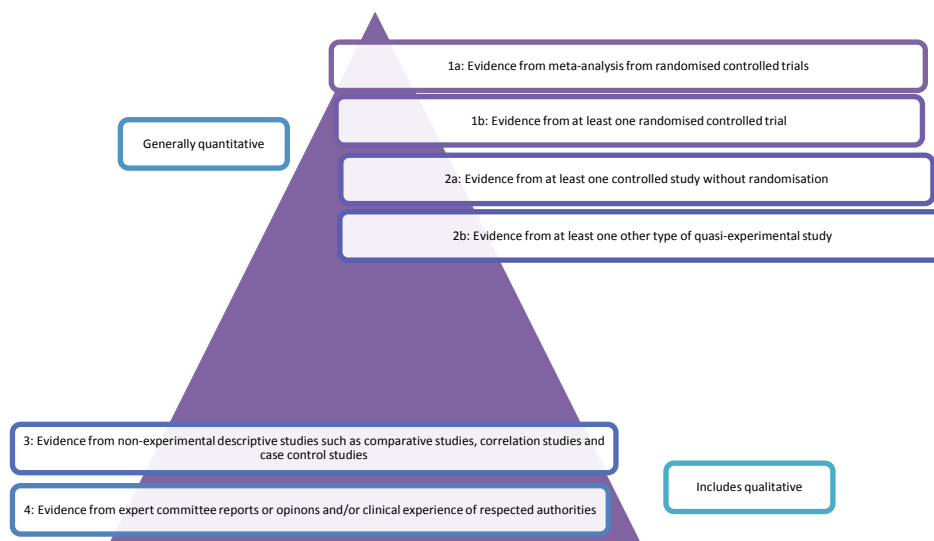
(see, for example, *Qualitative Health Research; International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*) that focus on the value of using qualitative approaches to examine all areas of health and illness. Arguably, however, it is this exact field that poses a great challenge for contemporary qualitative researchers, and perhaps present the greatest risk to our progress, as ideas and ideologies often spread from medicine to other disciplines.

Thus, before we in the qualitative community congratulate ourselves too heartily on our achievements over the last few decades, it is important to recognize the journey that is still yet to come; particularly in ‘convincing’ certain academic and practice-based communities to both accept and utilize the methodologies and methods we have to offer (Morse, 2006). Most importantly, there are issues in ensuring that contemporary models presented are acceptable within and beyond the qualitative community, that more advanced issues and debates are internally managed (see O’Reilly & Kiyimba, in press), and that future directions in funding and practice consider the applied aspects of qualitative inquiry, to better address the growing emphasis on evidence-based work.

### **The Reign of Evidence-Based Practice**

It is well-known that the qualitative community is working against the backdrop of a contemporary world that has been globally subjected to austerity measures within the on-going economic crisis. Higher education in many areas of the world, including the US and the UK, has faced increasing financial pressures, with funding for research becoming more competitive and limited. Thus, while the growing acceptance of qualitative inquiry indeed occurred within a healthier funding climate, its future rests within one of cuts, limited budgets, and economic pressures. This is a particularly pertinent reality given that qualitative researchers typically have greater difficulties acquiring funding, and more generally face challenges with getting their research approaches taught, published, and implemented (Morse, 2006).

This reality has become most notably recognized in the field of health and medicine, which has posed a model of evidence-based practice to promote the value of research and ensure ‘best practice’ based on evidence. Although qualitative research is no longer ignored by medical researchers or their funding bodies (Morse, 2006), this hierarchy has had the unfortunate consequence of relegating qualitative evidence to the bottom of disciplinary priorities, positioning qualitative research as less important or valuable than its quantitative counterparts. Evidently, the randomised controlled trial has been positioned as the ‘gold standard’ of evidence, which has the potential to minimize the value of or discount other useful and influential sources of knowledge (Estabrooks, 1998). Utilizing a range of sources, including the UK NICE guidelines and Marks (2002), O’Reilly and Kiyimba (in press) created a visual representation, as seen in Figure 1, to represent the hierarchies of evidence that are prevalent in the field of health and medicine.



Source: O’Reilly and Kiyimba (in press: Chapter 5)

*Figure 1: Hierarchy of evidence (O’Reilly & Kiyimba, in press)*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the ideologies inherent to this hierarchy have begun to slowly creep into other disciplines, such as psychology and education. For instance, St. Pierre (2004) noted a call for research proposals from the US Office of Educational Research and Improvement

that explicitly privileged experimental designs with randomized assignments, with the validity of qualitative research positioned as suspect. Similarly, Lather (2004) has written about the ways in which method is being legislated in the US, and St. Pierre (in press) has noted how the privileging of RCTs has moved us “even in qualitative methodology—from interpretation and contingency to causation and final truth” (p. 2). In the UK, there is a similar story. It is clear that quantitative, and particularly RCTs are favoured by funding bodies, with funding councils, such as the Medical Research Council (MRC), seemingly providing much of their available monies to work that is ‘scientific’ (read: not qualitative) in nature (although there is now much greater acceptance of mixed methods projects than previously, suggesting some value being seen in the qualitative aspect).

It is clear, therefore, that we are facing increasing challenges regarding the role that qualitative research can play, specifically when it is positioned as non-evidence in an evidence-based world. With decision-makers not clear on how useful qualitative research can be for generating evidence (Daly et al., 2007), qualitative evidence is often left unappreciated, under-used, and/or minimally disseminated, with “our seemingly insurmountable problem” being “to convince those that control research funding, curricula, and the publication of texts and mainstream journals that our work is significant” (Morse, 2006, p. 403). If one of our primary roles for the future is to ‘sell’ qualitative research in ways that communicates its value to the larger scholarly community (Morse, 2006), we, as a qualitative community, must not exempt ourselves from the evidence debate. Yet, what might be a way forward? How can we speak and act effectively from the bottom of the pyramid? How do we maintain the (perhaps tenuous) accepted position that we already have, while resisting our relegation to the bottom and promoting our place in future discussions around evidence and impact?

### **Finding Our Place within the Evidence-Based Climate**

While we do not claim to hold ‘the’ answers for our future, we recognize that the current climate demands critical conversations around the place we, as a qualitative community, hope to pursue and maintain in the future. We thus offer five considerations, and call for on-going dialogue as we collectively respond from the bottom of the pyramid.

First, we argue for productive inclusivity within the qualitative community, wherein we acknowledge our differences within a framework of constructive dialogue. Historically, there has been a great deal of intra-community critique (O’Reilly & Kiyimba, in press), wherein the very notion of qualitative research has been argued and works claiming to be qualitative have been deemed to be ‘not enough like my approach to qualitative research to count as real qualitative research’ (see, for example, Pelias’ discussion in Ellis et al., 2008). There is of course value in constructive critique, and a need for debate and ongoing defining of ‘what makes qualitative research qualitative research’; indeed, the new qualitative turn and post-qualitative inquiry have much to offer these ongoing debates (see St. Pierre, in press). What we suggest, however, is that such a conversation serves us better when we remain open to an inclusive conceptualization of qualitative inquiry, and recognize that each field brings with it particular foci, norms and expectations, and historical perspectives. Perhaps this is most pertinent when considering applied fields, wherein the expectation is often that conversations about qualitative research extend beyond ivory tower purism. We argue that it would be better to celebrate our heterogeneity and encourage diversity within the field. For example, O’Reilly and Kiyimba (in press) recognized that while we are all of the ‘same species’ there are a great many ‘breeds’ within it, and it is necessary to allow the ‘ducks to be ducks’ and the ‘penguins to be penguins’. In other words, it is time to encourage and communicate, rather than criticise simply because we are at methodological odds with each other. Thus, as we look toward the future, how might we continue to create spaces for productive and diverse dialogue?



Second, as noted, the impact of the evidence-based movement has resulted in the disciplining of the qualitative community, with ‘methods-driven’ approaches to qualitative work often viewed as the norm and our only hope of promotion. We view the relatively recent discussions around a post-qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2011) as being particularly useful here, and at a minimum, helpful in pushing us to imagine something beyond a positivistic response to the evidence-based climate. These arguments push us to consider what would occur if our response from the bottom was one in which we envisioned theories and concepts as guiding our research (St. Pierre, in press), or where there was something beyond coding (Jackson, 2013). Yet, like Greene (2013), we “wonder about the privileging of philosophy over practice” (p. 755). In our current climate, what might a post-qualitative perspective offer as we work to moving beyond being relegated to the bottom?

Third, there remains a more general need to re-think our role in informing policy. Over the next few years, we must find ways to highlight the contributions we can make to policy discussions – contributions that are worthy of being more than ‘anecdotes offered from the bottom of the pyramid’. As Salle and Flood (2012) discussed, in applied fields, such as education, qualitative research is often overlooked by policy makers; however, they noted that with “planning and foresight, qualitative research can inform practice and policy” (p. 139). For example, Weatherly and Lipsky (1977) studied the implementation of the state special education law in Massachusetts and determined that front line school personnel used various coping mechanisms to manage the implementation of the law within their everyday practices. This qualitative study is now considered a seminal piece on policy implementation and adaptation. If we are to inform policy in a similar manner in the future, we must recognize how and where our work might best produce new understandings for everyday policy implementation. This may not relate to evaluating the effectiveness of policies per say, but in helping policymakers understand how the policies they create are directly (dis)erving

the communities they intend to impact. What can we do as a community to engage in thoughtful, in-depth analyses that give policy-makers enriched understandings of the policies that they create?

Fourth, the realities of a competitive funding climate demand rethinking our place in participating in funded research. Recognizing that funded research is often viewed as central to informing policies that impact our daily lives, it is likely unwise to simply excuse ourselves from pursuing funded research. Yet, with qualitative research positioned at the ‘bottom of the pyramid’, funding for purely qualitative work is inevitably limited and indeed our chances are slim. While contentious, in recent years, mixed methods researchers have seen increasing success at securing funding. Perhaps, then, a funding consideration to better address evidence-based work, at least as it is currently defined, is found through mixed methods research. In such a scenario, a qualitative researcher may find themselves part of a research team, with the aims of building greater acceptance of qualitative work and illustrating its utility. Within such a scenario, of course, it is necessary to recognize that not everyone knows what qualitative research is, and the qualitative community should have an agenda to promote awareness, not only amongst the academic world, but also to areas of practice and the general public (Morse, 2006). Yet, is this too much of a compromise? What might be lost, if anything?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it remains critical to continue dialoguing around the ways in which evidence and quality are assessed in qualitative research. Some scholars have argued that criteria to assess qualitative research would assist in transparency in the peer review process, and a qualitative hierarchy of evidence would help practitioners to identify research which provides a strong basis for action (Daly et al., 2007). Yet, others have shared concerns about standards that lead to restrictions, and serve to determine what does and does not get funded (see, for example, Freeman, de Marrias, Preissle, Roulston, & St.

Pierre, 2007). Regardless of our position, notions around ‘evidence’ and what counts as qualitative evidence, as well as expectations around standards, are part of the present-day climate. How might we participate in this conversation? How might our varied perspectives on these issues inform the ‘place’ we argue from?

### Conclusions

As we continue to celebrate how far we have come, we must also remain cognizant of the current state of research. With qualitative research currently positioned at the bottom of the pyramid, perhaps we can take stock of both where we’ve come from and where we hope to go. As Morse (2006) asked: is it not “our right to have this [qualitative] evidence accepted, funded, and published” (p. 421)? So, at this critical point in our history, as Denzin noted, we have the opportunity to:

... take hold of the terms that define our existence in relationship to the other disciplines and the journals and the apparatuses and the departments and tenure and recruitment and teaching and instruction and funding and publishing and journals. To take hold of our existence, our own history, and make it into a dream that was there from the beginning when we were called into this space. To do something different than what we had been doing up until we got here. (Ellis et al., p. 276)

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