

# Qualitative Research and Its Place in Psychological Science

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In discussing the place of diverse qualitative research within psychological science, the authors highlight the potential permeability of the quantitative–qualitative boundary and identify different ways of increasing communication between researchers specializing in different methods. Explicating diversity within qualitative research is facilitated, initially, through documenting the range of qualitative data collection and analytic methods available. The authors then consider the notion of paradigmatic frame and review debates on the current and future positioning of qualitative research within psychological science. In so doing, the authors argue that the different ways in which the concept of paradigm can be interpreted allow them to challenge the idea that diverse research paradigms are *prima facie* incommensurate. Further, reviewing the ways in which proponents of qualitative research are seeking to reconfigure the links between paradigms helps the authors to envisage how communication between research communities can be enhanced. This critical review allows the authors to systematize possible configurations for research practice in psychology on a continuum of paradigm integration and to specify associated criteria for judging intermethod coherence.

*Keywords:* qualitative research, quantitative methods, methodology, pragmatism, history of psychology

This article offers a concise overview of qualitative methods in psychology focusing, particularly, on its diversity. In order to provide a way into understanding the diversity of qualitative research, we provide a structured overview of the range of data collection and analytic methods available, explore how the field can be understood with respect to paradigmatic frame, and review possible ways in which qualitative research might be positioned within psychological science. Since qualitative and quantitative methods are often presented as opposing approaches leading to separate, and sometimes conflicting, research communities, we pay particular attention to the potential permeability of the quantitative–qualitative boundary and to finding ways of increasing communication between researchers situated within different methodologies.

This overview is timely as the growth in qualitative research in recent years, both within psychology and across the social and health sciences, has been phenomenal (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2001). Although the volume of qualitative re-

search in psychology relative to quantitative methods remains modest, and despite the exclusion of qualitative research from many of the most prestigious outlets (see Rennie, Watson, & Monteiro, 2002, for figures), qualitative articles are being published increasingly in mainstream psychology journals. As well, there has been an explosion in dedicated textbooks, journals, conferences, and workshops attempting to address the demand for qualitative research from students, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers. The current moment is especially fitting given the establishment in 2005 of the British Psychological Society Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section (Madill & Todd, 2002), currently the largest section, and the campaign to found a Division for Qualitative Inquiry of the American Psychological Association.

The surge in popularity of qualitative methods in psychology can be traced to dissatisfaction with cognitive–experimental psychology in the 1960s and 1970s (Armistead, 1974; Parker, 1989). During this period, broadly humanistic qualitative methods were developed as one response to a wider countercultural critique of traditional sources of authority (e.g., empirical phenomenology: Giorgi, 1970b). A second wave of qualitative methods was then ushered into psychology with the importation of postmodernist and post-structuralist perspectives during the 1980s and early 1990s as well as a central focus on discourse or text (e.g., discourse analysis: Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The situation in the early 21st century is one of heterogeneity, with qualitative research best conceptualized as a fuzzy set. The field

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consists of clusters of methods with features in common that overlap, in some respects, with other clusters, while at the same time, some methods have no obvious features in common with other methods. To complicate matters further, because qualitative methods can be clustered in different ways, no typology is definitive. Although diverse, we argue that there is utility in maintaining the category *qualitative research*: The field is often defined in default as “not quantitative”; it has an identifiable history in psychology; and the recent drive to create relevant organizations is based on a sense of shared identifications and professional interests.

Maintaining the category qualitative research, however, does not require overhomogenizing the field. In our opinion, this has occurred when qualitative research is described as having some defining characteristics, such as a focus on meaning and interpretation (see Holloway & Todres, 2003, for a critique of this tendency). In addition, criticism of qualitative research from mainstream psychology tends to converge on particular perceived problems such as the intrusion of subjectivity, usually termed *bias*, and a tendency toward induction (as opposed to a hypothetico-deductive approach; see Archer, 2004, for a mainstream psychology critique of qualitative research; and Marecek, 2003, for a response to popular myths about qualitative research). Attempts at consensus from within the qualitative community, and critiques from without, can give the impression that qualitative research is a much more unified field than is in fact the case, and this misconception has potentially damaging implications. For example, research articles may be judged against evaluation criteria posited as generic to qualitative methods, while in actuality, they are inappropriate for the specific qualitative method used. Furthermore, qualitative research in general may be dismissed unfairly on the basis of familiarity with only one or two kinds of method. Moreover, potentially creative and productive research may be lost through failure to appreciate the array of qualitative methods available.

Seeking to maintain an appropriately complex picture of qualitative research in psychology, we first offer a structured overview of the range of data collection and analytic methods available. We then explicate further why it is difficult to define qualitative research through highlighting the different frameworks within which qualitative research can be conducted. In our final section, we argue that recognizing pluralism in qualitative research has implications for communication between traditions, and we explore ways in which intertradition links, including those with quantitative methods, might be configured.

### Qualitative Data Collection

We begin by presenting and discussing a list of methods for collecting qualitative data (Table 1). Although we have attempted to be comprehensive, this list is not exhaustive. A

perusal of published works shows how qualitative data collection methods can be tailored in unique ways within individual studies, and also how idiosyncratic methods have been adopted by a researcher, or research group, for one or a series of related studies without further or wider use. For example, we have included memory books, even though they have been reported in just one recent publication, because it appears a useful development of the more established approach of memory work. However, we cannot hope to capture all such kinds of development here.

In making sense of diversity, the first structure we impose is to separate methods of qualitative data collection from methods of qualitative data analysis. One problem, however, is that the distinction between data collection and analysis in qualitative research is not always easy to make (e.g., in Delphi groups, panelists selected for relevant expertise collaborate in the production of a consensus statement on the matter under investigation in successive rounds of communication). Moreover, some methods of qualitative analysis presuppose a specific form of data collection so that they are artificially separated in the format presented here (e.g., the free-association narrative interview and psychoanalytically informed analysis as developed by Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), even if the link is typical rather than essential (e.g., field notes and ethnography). Second, being a fuzzy set, there is no definitive way of classifying qualitative methods and, hence, any system necessitates judgment on the part of the author. We have opted to cluster the methods of data collection and of analysis in terms of procedural focus although, again, this is problematic because some methods cross-identified procedural boundaries. However, a procedural classification offers an accessible heuristic, captures an important facet of these methods, and is likely to be of major interest to researchers exploring the potential usefulness of these techniques (for alternative possible systems, see those listed in Creswell, 2007; Finlay & Evans, in press). Focusing on a procedural categorization, we have divided methods of qualitative data collection into five categories: collaborative, interview, naturally-occurring, observational, and structured.

Collaborative methods of data collection involve individuals working together to generate material for analysis in a way that challenges the distinction between participant and researcher. For example, in memory work a group will decide on a facet of experience to study (e.g., saying sorry, Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, & Benton, 1992) and collaborate in rounds of discussion of relevant memories with the aim of developing an integrated and theorized understanding. Hence, collaborative methods are democratic in their ethos and conceptualization of expertise. Data collection may also merge with data analysis because the process of describing an experience (e.g., of anger in a conceptual encounter study, de Rivera, 2006) overlaps with the analytical endeavor of understanding how the experience is structured. In general, collaborative methods appear to

Table 1  
*Methods of Collecting Qualitative Data*

Procedural categorization	Qualitative method	Example study
Collaborative	Conceptual encounter	de Rivera (1981)
	Delphi groups	Rowe, Wright, & Bolger (1991)
	Memory work	Haug (1987)
Interview	Role play	K. M. Yardley (1982)
	Biographical	Anderson (1981)
	Creative/dramatological	Douglas (1985)
	Ethnographic	Spradley (1979)
	Focus groups	Merton & Kendall (1946)
	Free association narrative	Hollway & Jefferson (2000)
	Group	Woods & Griffiths (2002)
	Interpersonal process recall	Kagan (1965)
	Narrative	Riessman (1993)
	Reflexive	Denzin (2001)
	Semi-structured	J. A. Smith (1995)
	Structured	Esterberg (2002)
	Telephone	E. M. Smith (2005)
	Theme-centered	Schorn (2000)
Naturally-occurring	Unstructured	Gibson (1998)
	Archival documents	Berg (2001)
	Diaries	Symon (1998)
	Internet material	Mann & Stewart (2000)
	Memory books	Thomson & Holland (2005)
	Naturally-occurring conversations	Potter & Hepburn (2005)
Observational	Visual material	Beloff (1997)
	Field notes	Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (1995)
	Observation	Banister (1994)
Structured	Participant observation	Hammersley & Atkinson (1983)
	Open-ended questionnaires	Johnson, Sieveking, & Clanton (1974)
	Protocols	Giorgi (1970a)
	Q-methodology	Stephenson (1953)
	Repertory grids	Kelly (1955)
	Vignettes	Miller et al. (1997)

borrow from therapeutic techniques in seeking to generate insight through the process of immersion in, and shared experience of, a topic, and in this way can be thought of as broadly humanistic.

Interviews seem designed to tap lived experience and, particularly in the semi-structured format, are the most popular method of qualitative data collection/generation in psychology (e.g., Madill, 2007). There are, however, national differences in preferred technique with, for example, face-to-face interviewing, the norm in the United Kingdom, and telephone interviewing, predominating in Scandinavia (Bardsley, Wiles, & Powell, 2006). There are many different types of interview. The unstructured interview uses a free-flowing conversational style in contrast to the structured interview, in which very specific, preprepared questions are asked in a determined order. Both appear rare in the qualitative literature because qualitative researchers typically prefer to strike a balance between retaining inter-

viewer control and approximating normal conversation. While the semi-structured and narrative formats both use nonleading open questions, the narrative style prioritizes elicitation of personal stories with minimum researcher prompting. Biographical interviews, by definition, focus on life history and may involve a narrative style. Moreover, inspired by the narrative style, the free-association narrative interview links the tradition of biographical interviewing with psychoanalytical theory. A central premise here is that participants will, unconsciously, provide important information about themselves that is then open to analytic interpretation through tracking the participant's chain of associations. Interpersonal process recall involves asking participants to make explicit their internal experiences during review of prior (usually video-recorded) therapy sessions in which he or she took part. In the ethnographic interview, it is the participant's tacit and explicit knowledge as a member that is tapped.

In theory, most of these interview styles may be used with more than one participant at a time, although the norm seems to be one-to-one. We have therefore included group interviewing as a distinct form of data collection (Morgan, 1997). Another reason for distinguishing the group interview is to contrast it to the focus group because often these terms are used interchangeably. The focus group might be considered a particular kind of group interview designed to elicit opinion about a product or topic, using particular terminology (e.g., moderator as opposed to interviewer), and originally developed in the field of market research. One of the more radical approaches to interviewing is the reflexive mode proposed by Denzin (2001), who deconstructs established conventions and advocates using a variety of genres, for example a game or a drama, to produce evocative data. This has resonances with the dramatological interview, in which the interviewer is encouraged to elicit effective communication through conceptualizing his or her own role as a conscious and reflective social performance: actor, director, choreographer.

The category *naturally-occurring* brings together a diverse range of texts generated in the course of everyday life. The researcher may set the context and/or boundary to the data collection, for example by providing a diary or memory book for completion on a specific topic, but the researcher's impact is generally just the sampling of material. Archival documents range from newspaper articles, television programs, books, and magazines to more official sources such as health records and policy documents. We note Internet materials separately as an important kind of archival data that is of particular contemporary research interest. Some researchers prioritize the study of naturally-occurring conversations and critique the artificiality of research interviews (e.g., Potter & Hepburn, 2005; <http://asksage.typepad.com/methods/2008/04/why-interview.html>). Naturally-occurring conversations often include telephone calls recorded in the normal course by service providers, but therapy sessions and medical consultations are classified here if conducted just as they would be outside a research context. Naturally-occurring data also include visual material such as photographs or murals, and other forms of material objects, the meaning and impact of which can be the subject of inquiry.

Observation has formed the basis for much qualitative research, with developmental psychologists utilizing laboratory and field observations of children and their caretakers. A researcher may also base his or her analysis on notes made in the field as an independent observer of, for example, a subculture or institutional setting. Participant observation has developed as a technique that utilizes knowledge developed through the researcher's social engagement with the phenomenon of study.

Finally, methods of data collection we have categorized under the term *structured* are, in some ways, closest to more

traditional means of data collection in psychology and, indeed, may use numbers. Open-ended questionnaires prompt qualitative response, rather than numerical response, but allow little or no modification of format on the part of researcher or participant to follow up unanticipated avenues or challenge the way in which the questions are posed. Q-methodology and repertory grids can be used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. For example, repertory grids can be used qualitatively to elicit participants' constructs in their own terms, but participants can also be asked to provide ratings for statistical analysis. Protocols used within the context of phenomenological research are verbal or written records of observations or experience typically obtained in response to a standardized question designed by the researcher (e.g., Robbins, 2006). Protocols may also take the form of think-aloud verbal reports of cognitive functioning in relation to completing a task. Vignettes are also a structured technique in that a scenario is provided for participants to consider. However, given this, they can be used to generate various forms of data, from ratings of prompt questions to free-form participant conversation.

Clearly, then, forms of qualitative data collection can vary greatly, from the type of data considered (personal accounts, group discussions, institutional documents) to the goals of the research (understanding individual experience, explicating the structure of verbal interaction, highlighting social influences). Hence, assumptions about a unified field, whether designed to provoke friendly discussion or to challenge and criticize, fall wide of the mark.

### Qualitative Data Analysis

As with data collection, there are a variety of modes of performing qualitative data analysis. Again, the list we present (Table 2) is comprehensive but not exhaustive. Focusing again on a procedural categorization, we have divided methods of qualitative data analysis into discursive, thematic, structured, and instrumental. Because it is not easy to separate data collection and analysis within what we have termed collaborative methods of data collection, we do not reiterate these methods in Table 2.

Discursive methods tend to focus on the detail of the text, explicating the ways in which phenomena are brought into being through the use of linguistic resources and applying forms of discourse theory (e.g., the discursive production of masculine identities, Edley & Wetherell, 1995). Some of these methods comprise a number of different strands. There are many varieties of discourse analysis (see Wetherell, 1998), and examples of psychoanalytically informed analyses that draw on different forms of psychoanalytic theory (e.g., Kleinian: Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Lacanian: Parker, 2005). In addition, there are different views as

Table 2  
*Methods of Analyzing Qualitative Data*

Procedural categorization	Qualitative method	Example study
Discursive	Conversation analysis	Sacks (1972)
	Discourse analysis	Burman & Parker (1992); Potter & Wetherell (1987)
	Metaphorical analysis	Lakoff & Johnson (1980)
	Psychoanalytically informed analysis	Hollway & Jefferson (1997)
Thematic	Semiotic analysis	Manning & Cullum-Swan (1998)
	Analytic induction	Znaniecki (1934)
	Framework analysis	Ritchie & Spencer (1994)
	Grounded theory	Glaser & Strauss (1967)
	Interpretative phenomenological analysis	J. A. Smith (1996)
	Template analysis	King (1998)
	Thematic analysis	Braun & Clarke (2006)
Structured	Theory-led thematic analysis	Hayes (1997)
	Attributional analysis	Stratton (1997)
	Comprehensive process analysis	Elliott (1989)
	Consensual qualitative research	Hill, Thompson, & Williams (1997)
	Content analysis	Hsieh & Shannon (2005)
	Logical analysis	Williams (1981)
	Protocol analysis	Ericsson & Simon (1984)
	Q-methodology	Cronbach (1953); Stephenson (1953)
	Repertory grid analysis	Bannister (1965)
	Task analysis	Greenberg (1984)
	Instrumental	(Collaborative/participatory) Action research
Co-operative inquiry		Heron (1996)
Ethnography		Griffin (2000); Thomas (1909)
Ethnomethodology		Garfinkle (1967)
Feminist research		Roberts (1981)
Media framing analysis		R. L. Shaw & Giles (in press)
Narrative analysis		Emden (1998); Mishler (1986)
Phenomenological methods		van Kaam (1966); van Manen (1990)
Process evaluation		Calnan & Ferlie (2003)
Rapid assessment		Scrimshaw & Gleason (1992)
Visual methodologies		Firth, Riley, Archer, & Gleeson (2005)

to the compatibility of discursive and psychoanalytic approaches (see Edley, 2006).

Thematic analysis focuses on the coding (typically inductive or “bottom-up”) of qualitative data, producing clusters of text with similar meaning, often searching for concepts appearing to capture the essence of the phenomenon under investigation and producing mid-range theories. Many qualitative methods fall under this heading specifying slightly different coding techniques and/or theoretical orientation. The description *thematic* is often used to denote a specific form of analysis, however its meaning and use has been vague and inconsistent. Nonetheless, we have included thematic analysis as a specific method in its own right within this category because an excellent start has been made to develop it as a legitimate and transparent methodology (see Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Structured methods provide particular procedural clarity. This is achieved through prescribing a priori domains of analytic interest, devising preprepared coding schemes, utilizing prior theory to interpret data, and/or transforming qualitative data into numbers (e.g., through counting instances). Although such methods work with qualitative datasets, some are on the fringes of acceptability as qualitative methods because number of instances does not necessarily constitute psychological or theoretical significance. Moreover, protocol analysis can be used within experimental cognitive science research, although it is also the name given to a form of empirical phenomenological analysis conducted within an explicitly experiential human science framework.

Instrumental methods are distinguished by commitment to a research ethos, a philosophical perspective, and/or research

aims while drawing on a variety of methods (particularly, but not exclusively, qualitative) to fulfill a purpose. This provides leeway for methodological debate, for example, between empirical and hermeneutic phenomenology (Hein & Austin, 2001). Similarly, B. Smith and Sparkes (2006) divide narrative approaches into those that address language use, which often utilize conversation or discourse analysis, and those more concerned with thematic content, which may draw on forms of grounded theory, content, or structural analysis to do so. Although analysis of visual materials is not new, particularly in disciplines such as anthropology, visual analysis is receiving much interest currently within psychology. Articles in the “Visual Methodologies” special edition of *Qualitative Research in Psychology* (2005, Vol. 2, Iss. 3) provide examples of discursive and thematic approaches to analyzing different kinds of visual material.

Research using what we have termed *instrumental methods* is most likely to draw on mixed methodologies: However, although obviously related, we would like to maintain a distinction between mixed-method and instrumental modes of research. Instrumental modes of research may draw on a variety of research methods but do so within the framework of an overarching theoretical or ethical commitment. For example, ethnography aims to describe and interpret a culture or social group and has a commitment to naturalistic inquiry. The researcher is likely to use participant observation and field notes but may also conduct interviews and collect relevant documents. The ethnography itself may draw on discourse theory and forms of thematic analysis and so on in its writing. As a further example, action research is committed to social or organizational change and empowers participants as active and equal contributors within this project. Any research method compatible with this framework may be enlisted, with qualitative approaches often best suited to such democratization of the research process.

Fischer (2006) notes that in England methods such as discourse analysis are better established in comparison with those in North America, and certainly, discourse analysis alongside grounded theory and interpretative phenomenological analysis appear prominent in United Kingdom psychology. Grounded theory, originally conceived within North American sociology during the 1960s, has been adopted and adapted by British psychologists (e.g., Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003) and is widely used in health psychology. Discourse analytic methods for psychology evolved in the United Kingdom during the 1980s and have become most embedded within (critical) social psychology and feminist approaches, both of which have leanings toward anti-foundationalism in eschewing the existence of universal truths. This resonates with Rennie’s (2004) observation that United Kingdom psychology has been relatively open to postmodernist theory. Finally, interpretative phenomenological analysis developed in the United Kingdom

during the 1990s, and it has been most prevalent within health and clinical psychology.

Clearly then, as with methods of data collection, modes of qualitative analysis can vary quite considerably along a number of dimensions. For example, the key aims of research can differ greatly, with grounded theory geared toward articulating social processes, forms of protocol analysis explicating cognitive mechanisms, and process evaluation looking at the impact of policy and practice in organizations. As well, it can be seen that not all qualitative research can be classified as inductive, that is, as an open-ended discovery-oriented approach to analysis. For example, much discourse analytic research is framed explicitly by theoretical and political agendas (e.g., Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004), as is feminist (e.g., Day, Gough & McFadden, 2003) and action research. Donmoyer (2001) also points out that some qualitative researchers actively seek to test out particular theoretical assumptions in applied settings.

We have offered a structured overview of the range of data collection and analytic methods available, drawing attention to the diverse nature of qualitative research in psychology. Our next step is to provide a critical overview of the paradigmatic framing of qualitative research that helps to make sense of this diversity by demonstrating how methodological considerations are influenced by paradigmatic commitment. However, the influence is mutual. Paradigmatic commitment will influence the way in which one utilizes methods of data collection and analysis and, because there is often no one-to-one correspondence between method and paradigm, there is flexibility in the purposes to which many qualitative methods can be put and the particular paradigmatic framework they can serve.

### Research Paradigms in the Social Sciences

Many authors interested in capturing the similarities and differences between approaches to research have found Kuhn’s (1962) concept of the *paradigm* a useful way of classifying methodologies, that is, the different rationales underpinning research procedures. The term paradigm has, however, attracted different definitions, not least within Kuhn’s original exposition, and Morgan (2007) helpfully provides us with the four most common ways of interpreting what is meant by a paradigm (Table 3). The model examples interpretation of paradigm raises to paradigmatic status research programs differentiated by topic and/or research questions guided by exemplars of good practice and accepted ways of working. Paradigm, defined as shared beliefs among those in a research field, captures the work of research groups or small research communities, as opposed to whole disciplines, and is articulated, often implicitly, in the work of actual researchers. If interpreted as epistemological stances, paradigms are clustered on the basis of shared ontology and epistemology: assumptions about the nature of

Table 3  
*Identified Versions of Paradigms and Their Implications*

Versions of the paradigm concept	Emphasis in relation to methodology <sup>a</sup>	Implications for research practice <sup>a</sup>	
		Methodological pluralism <sup>c</sup>	
Model examples <sup>b</sup>	Paradigm complementarity <sup>c</sup>	Eclecticism <sup>a</sup>	
Shared beliefs among those in a research field	Shared meanings & joint action Axiology <sup>c</sup>	Pragmatism Utilitarianism <sup>c</sup>	
Epistemological stances	Paradigm incommensurability	Specialism <sup>a</sup>	
Worldviews	Paradigm proliferation <sup>a</sup>	Fragmentation <sup>a</sup>	

*Note.* All material in this table is from Morgan (2007) except where indicated.

<sup>a</sup> Although implied by Morgan, these are articulated by the present authors for the specific purposes of this article.

<sup>b</sup> See also Gage (1963), "models, patterns or schemata" (p. 95) in Donmoyer (2001).

<sup>c</sup> From Donmoyer (2001).

reality and theories about what counts as knowledge. Finally, with the worldviews interpretation, paradigms are considered all-encompassing perspectives that include beliefs (morals, values, aesthetics) and ways of experiencing and thinking. Hence, personal experience and culture are understood to play a role in science. These four interpretations of the paradigm concept are not mutually exclusive as Morgan understands the more specific versions, that is, from model examples, to be nested within the increasingly generalized interpretations up to paradigms as worldviews. Each version has a different emphasis in relation to methodology and implication for research practice. This is summarized briefly in Table 3 and is explicated more fully later in the article when we discuss how qualitative research is positioned within psychological science.

Table 4 provides a summary of ways in which social science research has been classified paradigmatically by authors who have a particular interest in qualitative methods. This list cannot hope to be exhaustive, but an effort has been made to illustrate a variety of approaches. Most authors identify positivist and postpositivist paradigms. Constructivist and critical theory paradigms are also a regular feature. After this, the similarities are more difficult to find. However, at a broader level, it is interesting to note that most authors justify their framework through an interpretation of paradigms as epistemological stances. This substantiates Morgan's (2007) observation that this has been the dominant interpretation of Kuhn's concept in the social sciences. The exceptions shown are Donmoyer (2001), who draws on a shared beliefs understanding, and Creswell (2007), who steers more than most toward a worldview interpretation of paradigm, although the latter's taxonomy is very similar to those produced within an epistemological stances framework. Our intention here is to explore the methodological implications of identifying and separating paradigms on the basis of their epistemological and ontological premises. Explaining the main epistemological divi-

sions is beyond the scope of this article; however, Ponterotto (2005) provides an excellent primer:

Positivists emphasize dualism and objectivism . . . Postpositivists['] . . . position acknowledges that the researcher may have some influence on that being researched, but objectivity and researcher-subject independence remain important . . . Constructivists-interpretivists advocate a . . . stance that maintains that reality is socially constructed and, therefore, the dynamic interaction between researcher and participant is central . . . in critical theory . . . the relationship is also dialectic in nature, with the goal of inciting transformation in the participants (p. 131)

Most usually, and due to the demands of internal consistency, the epistemological stances interpretation of paradigm emphasizes paradigm incommensurability (for a contrary position, see Schultz & Hatch, 1996). Guba and Lincoln, who have provided possibly the most influential framework for mapping methodology in psychology within qualitative circles, are exponents of paradigm incommensurability, although their position has softened over time. Their 1994 chapter in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* posits the existence of incommensurable paradigmatic points of view even within qualitative research. Their 2005 chapter, however, offers a modified position in which incommensurability is maintained between what they term *positivistic* and *naturalistic* meta-paradigms,<sup>1</sup> while some commensurability between different kinds of naturalistic research is allowed (Table 4). In contrast, others (e.g., Donmoyer, 2001) argue that, in practice, researchers tend to be paradigmatically eclectic and that little attention has been paid to how the epistemological and ontological assumptions on which paradigms are said to be based (and about

<sup>1</sup> Confusingly, what Guba and Lincoln refer to as *positivistic* likely overlaps to a great extent with what is termed *naturalist* (as in natural science as opposed to human science) in other contexts; similarly, what they call *naturalistic* likely overlaps with what is often termed *interpretative*.

Table 4  
*Identified Research Paradigms in the Social Sciences*

Author(s)	Setting	Positivism	Postpositivism	Pragmatism	Advocacy/participatory	Social constructivism <sup>a</sup>
Creswell (2007)	Social & human science					
Lather (2006)	Education	Positivist	Interpretivist/social constructivist	Critical theory/emancipatory		
Modernist, structural, humanist metaparadigms						
Postmodernist, poststructural, posthumanist metaparadigms					Deconstructionist/postparadigms	
Guba & Lincoln (2005) <sup>b</sup>	Social sciences	Positivism	Postpositivism			
Positivistic metaparadigms						
Naturalistic metaparadigms						Participatory <sup>c</sup>
Ponterotto (2005)	Counseling	Positivism	Postpositivism	Critical theory etc. Critical-ideological	Constructivism Constructivist-interpretivist	
Esterberg (2002)	Sociology	Positivism	Naturalism	Feminist & other critical approaches	Social constructionist & interpretive	Postmodernism
Donmoyer (2001)	Education	Truth seeking	Thick description/local knowledge	Developmental & quasi-historical	Personal essay	Praxis & social change
Denzin & Lincoln (2000)	Social sciences	Positivism	Positivist/postpositivism	Critical (Marxist, emancipatory)	Constructivist-interpretive	Feminist-poststructural
Interpretative metaparadigms						
Tom & Valli (1990)	Education	Positivist	Interpretivist	Critical	Craft knowledge <sup>d/</sup> action research <sup>e</sup>	

<sup>a</sup> Although there may be different shades of meaning in some contexts (see Potter, 1996), social constructivism and social constructionism will here be treated as interchangeable terms.

<sup>b</sup> Development of earlier versions, for example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1994).

<sup>c</sup> From Heron and Reason (1997).

<sup>d</sup> From Schön (1983).

<sup>e</sup> Action research added here as linked to craft knowledge through being rooted in “an epistemology of practice and action” as opposed to “theory-oriented ways of knowing” (Donmoyer, 2001, p. 180).



which researchers may have little understanding or interest) actually influence practical research decisions. For example, although Ponterotto and Grieger (2007) situate a sample of qualitative methods within specific epistemological paradigms, this is achieved only under the proviso that “classifications are not always clear-cut and can be subject to some debate” (p. 412).

A common position is that practical research decisions should be governed by the research question. For example, Creswell (1998) suggests that how or what questions (as opposed to why questions) lend themselves to qualitative methods. Also, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) do allow that paradigmatic boundaries can be crossed in response to research questions and emerging data, although they draw an impervious line at the positivist–naturalist divide. Perhaps the strongest position that Guba and Lincoln (i.e., 1988) articulate on the link between paradigm and practical research decisions is that qualitative methods are most compatible with the naturalist meta-paradigm. However, they are clear that it is not the distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods that is important but rather that it is the underlying methodological logics of positivist and naturalistic approaches that are, on the whole, incommensurate. However, this is a subtle distinction, and Guba and Lincoln may still be interpreted as too easily conflating quantitative methods with positivism and qualitative methods with non-positivistic positions (for a critique, see Madill, 2008; Yu, 2006).

The term *positivism* is often used as a derogatory description for quantitative research and to imply, among other things, an unsophisticated understanding of the role of interpretation in the generation of knowledge. However, as Haverkamp and Young (2007) point out, there are many examples of qualitative research that demonstrate a positivist-like interest in accuracy and objectivity. The difficulty making a clear distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods per se is demonstrated further by Günter and Huber (2006), who argue that qualitative researchers often invoke the language of quantification (seldom, hardly ever, often responded) and that quantitative research rests on a series of qualitative decisions, including the translation of statistical results into psychological meaning (see also Meehl, 1992).

Paradigmatic frameworks help confer order on the complex array of research methodologies used in psychology and the social sciences. However, appreciating the strong influence of the epistemological stances interpretation of paradigm allows us to understand why boundaries are often reinforced between paradigms. Morgan’s (2007) identification of the different ways in which the paradigm concept can be interpreted allows us to challenge the idea that different paradigms are *prima facie* incommensurate, or that paradigms need to be defined on an epistemological basis. In what follows, we review the ways in which proponents of

qualitative research are seeking to reconfigure the link between paradigms in a bid to increase communication between research communities.

### Positioning Qualitative Research Within Psychological Science

Possible ways in which qualitative research might be positioned within psychological science are summarized in Table 3 under implications for research practice, with each linked to a particular version of the paradigm concept. Morgan’s (2007) explication of the different ways in which the concept of paradigm can be understood allows us to maintain the sense that there are fundamental methodological tensions in psychological science while highlighting options as to how these might be configured. Importantly, as the paradigm concept is interpreted in an increasingly generalized way, that is, from model examples through to worldviews, the implications for research practice increasingly emphasize paradigm differentiation (Figure 1). We conceptualize paradigms as model examples and paradigms as shared beliefs to underscore versions of methodological pluralism, linking the former to eclecticism and the latter to pragmatism and utilitarianism. We associate paradigms as epistemological stances with specialism and paradigms as worldviews with fragmentation (for an alternative continuum consisting of purists, situationists, and pragmatists, see Rossman & Wilson, 1985). These distinct approaches to managing diversity are now discussed.

#### *Eclecticism*

Methodological pluralism is a position indicating willingness to utilize a range of research tools and is, arguably, taken for granted in the natural sciences (Sechrest & Sidani, 1995). Integrating Morgan (2007) and Donmoyer’s (2001) work, we interpret some forms of methodological pluralism as situated within a model examples interpretation of paradigm. For Donmoyer, this represents a weak form of paradigm talk which may be particularly helpful in applied research where multiple perspectives aid understanding of complex real life problems (Shulman, 1986). When situated within a model examples interpretation of paradigm, methodological pluralism emphasizes the way in which the limitations of one method may be offset by the strengths of another. Paradigm *complementarity* is highlighted through stressing points of contact rather than differences between approaches and is enabled by the fact that, in practice, there are few barriers to utilizing a variety of methods in any one research project. In fact, complementarity, in terms of seeking “elaboration, enhancement, illustration, clarification of the results from one method with the results from another” (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989, p.259) appears the single most common and consistent justification for, and use of, mixed-method designs (Bryman, 2006).

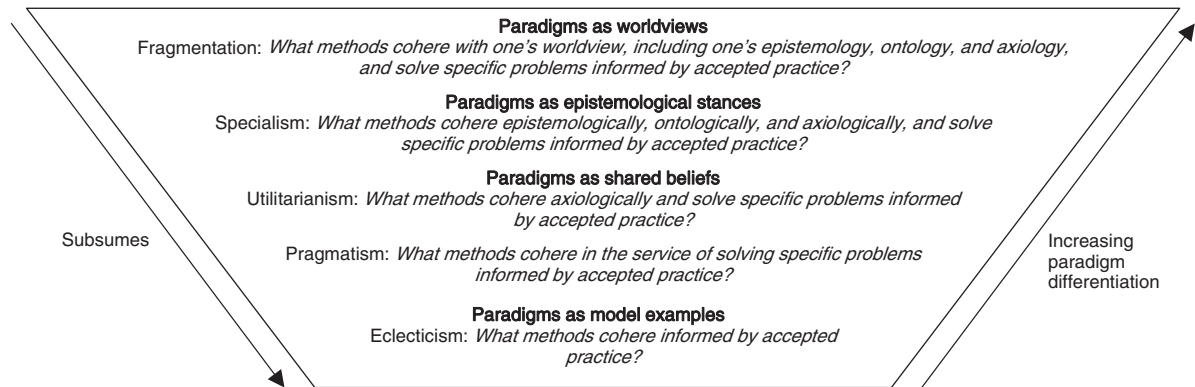


Figure 1. Criteria for judging intermethod coherence associated with increasingly generalized versions of “paradigm.”

Methodological pluralism is an early and sustained attempt at utilizing diverse approaches, but it may tend toward unreflective eclecticism through selecting techniques in an opportunistic manner, thereby risking charge of inconsistency. Attempts are underway to rectify this problem, and rationales have been produced for the disciplined selection of methods (for an analogy with regard to the development of integrative psychotherapy from more eclectic forms, see Brookes-Harris, 2008). Sechrest and Sidani (1995) suggest using formulaic (constrained by external and formal rules) and clinical (unconstrained and personal) approaches, similar to but not coterminous with quantitative and qualitative methods, as a check on each other. Similarly, *Integral Methodological Pluralism* (AQAL = all-quadrants-all-levels, e.g., Wilber, 2000) recommends drawing from at least three different methodological families for a holistic approach, exploring (a) direct experience (phenomenology or structuralism), (b) intersubjective understandings (cultural anthropology or hermeneutics), and (c) systems perspectives (autopoiesis theory, empiricism, social autopoiesis theory, or system theory).

Frameworks such as these provide a rationale for the selection of diverse methods. It remains unclear, however, how the methods and their findings are to be integrated, and Greene et al.’s (1989) review of mixed-method evaluation research reports that, while 32% of studies demonstrated integration in the discussion, only 9% attempted integration also during analysis. True to the understanding of paradigm as model examples, it is possible that integrative rationales will be developed over time through a body of exemplar studies, and Green et al. (1989) and Bryman (2006) have made a start by categorizing the ways in which quantitative and qualitative methods have been combined in practice. However, in its more eclectic forms, pluralism may overlook differences between methods such as approach to theory, may encounter problems when findings from diverse methods do not cohere (L. Yardley & Bishop, 2007), and

may underplay the political context in which one paradigm dominates in terms of perceived credibility and access to resources. More generally, Yanchar (1997) argues that there is not yet enough coherence across psychology as a discipline to allow an adequately integrated methodological pluralism because this would require development of a common theoretical base. Others, however, actively support cross-paradigm integration, which allows for difference, tension, and paradox, and psychologists are beginning to revisit the integrative potential of pragmatism as a middle ground between paradigm incommensurability and paradigm complementarity, as we now discuss.

### Pragmatism

Interpreting paradigms as shared beliefs among those in a research field, Morgan (2007) argues that the pragmatism of William James, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey provides a basis for communication between research communities. A pragmatic approach emphasizes shared meanings, joint action, and respect between different perspectives with the ultimate aim of solving specific problems in specific contexts.

Rennie (2007) offers a particularly thorough exposition of pragmatism in relation to methodology and offers us a carefully theorized meta-methodology for qualitative research which he calls *methodical hermeneutics*. He suggests that qualitative research has been marginalized in psychology due, in large part, to its epistemological fragmentation and that a coherent meta-methodology based in pragmatism has potential to bolster the field (a task for which, by implication, undertheorized eclecticism is deemed unsuitable). Rennie’s meta-methodology is based on four suggested methodological commonalities: (a) rhetoric (making a case for a particular interpretation of data); (b) critical realism (understanding reality to have independent existence but perceived and theorized in relation to our beliefs

and expectations); (c) a theory of inference based on an interplay of induction–abduction (observations and imaginative theorizing); and (d) disclosed reflexivity (explicating the researcher’s stake in the research). In this, he draws on the pragmatism of Drake et al. (1920), Margolis (1986), and Peirce (1965).

Although Rennie’s aim is the production of a meta-methodology for qualitative research, he alludes to methodological commonalities with positivist approaches, which, of course, are overwhelmingly associated with quantitative methods. However, he argues that it is a mistake for any qualitative method to be situated within positivism because such attempts would undermine the fundamentally hermeneutic nature of qualitative research (D. L. Rennie, personal communication, July 1, 2007). Our own position is that qualitative research is too diverse to be captured under the heading of hermeneutics, and indeed within the four proposed methodological commonalities, and that some qualitative research does share features associated with positivist approaches (see the fifth paragraph of Research Paradigms in the Social Sciences). However, a channel for communication with quantitative researchers is opened because the first three commonalities on which Rennie bases a meta-methodology for qualitative research are, arguably, present also in quantitative research—and he, himself, states that pragmatism draws little distinction between natural and human science (Rennie, 2000). Quantitative approaches are compatible with a meta-methodology that includes persuasive rhetoric (although this is generally hidden and downplayed), critical realism (particularly in postpositivist perspectives), and methodology as an interplay of induction–abduction (within an argument that the hypothetico–deductive understanding of method is a fundamental misunderstanding of how science works). This may place the onus on quantitative researchers to see features more readily associated with qualitative methods in their own approach, although many may quite happily acknowledge such characteristics in their work.

Where Rennie concentrates on the application of pragmatism as an alternative to the extremes of paradigm incommensurability and undertheorized assumptions of paradigm complementarity, L. Yardley (2007; L. Yardley & Bishop, 2007) offers an understanding of the implications for research practice. Implicitly critiquing eclecticism, she reconstructs mixing methods in terms of *composite analysis*. Utilizing Dewey’s pragmatism, she understands the rightness of knowledge and actions to be premised on the fulfillment of intended outcomes and, in this, sees no fundamental contradiction between qualitative/constructionist and scientific/positivist modes of inquiry. However, she signals a need to preserve important differences in approach through maintaining the separation of different forms of analysis while paying particular attention to how findings from different methods can be combined but not assuming that they

will necessarily converge (and even relatively well integrated mixed-method research has tended to ignore discrepant results, Greene et al., 1989). The rationale for preserving the integrity of different qualitative and quantitative methods is to maximize their unique contribution to knowledge and allow each to be validated in their own terms, although the approach also helps avoid subjugating qualitative methods to the traditionally more dominant quantitative ones. Hence, Yardley’s use of pragmatism is not apolitical. There is explicit appreciation of the existence of different starting assumptions and vested interests that require careful negotiation before shared understandings and mutually agreed action might be possible.

Nonetheless, Wertz (1999) notes two major problems that may limit the integrative potential of pragmatism: (a) Deciding what works is often a matter of opinion, and (b) not all research is designed to solve practical problems. Moreover, L. Yardley and Bishop (2007) acknowledge that many researchers may want to retain the goal, at least, of obtaining true and accurate, as opposed to (merely) workable, knowledge of the world. These issues show that pragmatism requires development and, like any position, is unlikely to provide a solution acceptable to all researchers. However, pragmatism does, at least, show promise as a coherent position claiming the middle ground between paradigm incommensurability and paradigm complementarity. We can, though, identify an alternative in utilitarianism.

### *Utilitarianism*

Utilitarianism is alluded to by Donmoyer (2001) as a way of theorizing interparadigm integration. This idea is relatively novel and appears, to us, to warrant further consideration. Donmoyer is ambivalent about whether his approach maps onto Kuhnian paradigm talk in a meaningful way, but his utilitarianism, like pragmatism, seems to draw on an understanding of paradigm as shared beliefs and, again like pragmatism, is critical of assuming too easily that paradigms are complementary. What distinguishes a middle ground guided by utilitarianism is the emphasis on value-infused research purpose in relation to methodology, that is, on axiology. Utilitarianism is an ethical philosophy in which morality is judged by the extent to which the consequences of actions maximize utility, defined as subjective welfare (i.e., the satisfaction of preferences such as happiness, desires, and goals: W. H. Shaw, 1999). Preferences, choosing one thing over another, are understood to be based in subjective values, and all utility maximizing preferences are considered of equal validity. Hence, utilitarianism does not proscribe how to maximize subjective welfare because this depends on what the preferences and values of people are and what appears to work best in practice.

In relation to research, Donmoyer (2001) suggests that utility maximization should be defined in terms of helpful-

ness to practitioners. We interpret this broadly to mean developing psychological knowledge to address real world problems from the perspective of those who could benefit. Donmoyer differentiates paradigms of qualitative research on the basis of five overarching value-infused purposes and associated fundamental research questions (see Table 4 of the current article). The following are adapted from Donmoyer (2001), Table 11.1:

1. The truth-seeking purpose: What is the correct answer?
2. The thick description purpose: How do the people studied interpret phenomena?
3. The developmental purpose: How does an individual change over time?
4. The personal essay purpose: What is the researcher's personal interpretation?
5. The praxis and social change purpose: How can we make advocacy part of our research design?

So, for example, the truth-seeking paradigm rests on the merit of positing the existence of a correct answer, however context-specific or provisional. The thick description paradigm presupposes the value of understanding the ways in which people assign meaning, however subjective or partial this may seem. Utility maximization provides a systematic base for deciding which paradigm is appropriate in the context of specific practitioner/user-defined goals. Donmoyer argues that differentiating paradigms on the basis of value/purpose creates interparadigm permeability and, since it is possible to address more than one purpose at a time, mutual understanding can develop even when different purposes appear to reflect different values. Moreover, it is difficult to dismiss those who choose to pursue different aims since, in principle, the validity of any utility maximizing purpose is upheld.

Despite these ostensible merits, we identify three problems that could limit the integrative potential of utilitarianism. First, psychological research does not always have obvious or immediate real world application (e.g., theory development, Haverkamp & Young, 2007), nor would all researchers agree always to prioritize practitioner/user requirements. This may not be fatal since what is encompassed by subjective welfare is open to debate and since different research communities might seek to maximize utility as defined in different ways. Second, Donmoyer's framework is developed for qualitative research only, although it might need only a little adjustment to incorporate quantitative methods. For example, quantitative methods seem compatible with the truth-seeking paradigm but may be less appropriate for thick description and praxis and

social change purposes, particularly where these emphasize deliberate inclusion of researcher subjectivity (Gitlin, Siegel, & Boru, 1989). However, third, dominant disciplinary opinion about the inherent value of different methods, and the perceived credibility of the value/purpose paradigms with which they are associated, is likely to be a huge barrier to embracing more utilitarian (practitioner/user-oriented) criteria for method/paradigm selection. Hence, the values aspect of a value/purpose-paradigms framework may present a very real obstacle to interparadigm communication with, for example, the value of striving for researcher objectivity difficult to compromise for some.

So, utilitarianism and pragmatism both look to the consequences of actions in practice and accept workability as an adequate criterion of success. Both have potential for theorizing a middle ground between accepting facile paradigm incommensurability or paradigm complementarity stances, and hence both can be taken to imply the need for communication between researchers situated within different methodologies while recognizing complexity and tension. Pragmatism is closer to complementarity in drawing on resources to solve specific problems in specific contexts, while utilitarianism edges toward incommensurability through clustering methods that cohere around common sets of values and purposes. Pragmatism is already being developed further by some qualitative researchers, while the potential of utilitarianism has yet to be seriously explored. These middle ground positions notwithstanding, some scholars prefer to emphasize methodological distinctiveness, which is where we now turn.

### *Specialism*

Not everyone will be persuaded that interparadigm commonalities are significant, and there is an argument that, despite growing support, forms of pluralism obscure psychological understanding by attempting to integrate fundamentally incompatible knowledge claims (Yanchar, 1997). Also, as Morgan (2007) points out, the dominant interpretation within the social sciences is of paradigm as an epistemological stance. The emphasis in relation to methodology within this conception is paradigm incommensurability, and the implication for research practice is one of specialism: that is, relatively isolated research communities focusing on a particular method or group of related methodologies. However, disunification is not necessarily problematic, and Kuhn more recently has characterized mature science as a collection of semi-autonomous research communities which, for psychology in particular, may be a sign of vitality (Kuhn, 1991, in McNally, 1992; see also Bower, 1993; Schulman, 1986).

Although exponents of paradigm incommensurability are careful to state that actual methods of data collection and analysis are often distinct from methodological concerns linked to epistemological stance, qualitative and quantitative

methods tend to be associated with different paradigms. The diverse field of qualitative research provides an array of frameworks and procedures that allow us to look in different ways at psychological phenomena and to raise novel questions and means of addressing them. For example, discursive psychology offers an avowedly anti-cognitivist stance to phenomena such as attitudes, memory, and identity by considering how such objects are brought into being in and through language (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Moreover, critical discourse analysts demonstrate the potential of psychology to act unreflectively in the service of state control (Parker, 1989). We would argue that positions such as these, countering dominant perspectives and shining a critical light on the discipline, are important in a properly self-questioning social science and should not be subsumed in attempts at overhomogenization (see also Lather, 2006). In addition, it has probably benefited qualitative research in psychology to strategically emphasize paradigm incommensurability in order to develop and demonstrate what is unique about qualitative methods and to establish a presence and identity as a research community.

Some proponents, however, see an end to these benefits in the continued marginalization of qualitative research and proliferation of schisms within the field. For example, Donmoyer (2001) argues that paradigm incommensurability presents an exaggerated picture of the significance of differences. Similarly, Elliott (2007) critiques the proliferation of qualitative methods per se, arguing that vested interests in branded methods means that too much is made of minor procedural differences. Hence, as we review above, some proponents are exploring ways of preserving the unique identity of qualitative methods in psychology while theorizing a more integrated understanding of psychological science. The fear is that without such a move there will be a consolidation of orthodox psychological science comprising traditional paradigms and methods, as predicted by Denzin and Lincoln (2005): a situation which is arguably already being experienced in the field of education (Wright, 2006). More generally, a recent consultation exercise for the Economic and Social Research Council in the United Kingdom (Bardsley et al., 2006) identified several research needs related to qualitative approaches that demonstrate a will to increase communication between specialisms: integrating qualitative and quantitative research; integrating multiple qualitative methods; integrating bottom-up and top-down coding and interpretation; and the linking of biographical and life course research. Despite such trends toward communication and collaboration, however, some researchers seem to go beyond preserving specialisms and celebrate even greater diversity.

### *Fragmentation*

Morgan (2007) argues that understanding paradigms as worldviews, which incorporates the influence of personal

experience and culture, is too broad to have a direct impact on research practice. We can, however, conceptualize worldviews as emphasizing paradigm proliferation in relation to methodology, with the implication for research practice one of fragmentation. For us, fragmentation appears to reflect in exaggerated form the limitations of specialism and to maintain less of its merits. The worldviews interpretation of paradigm seems linked to positions highlighting local forms of knowing, or *new voices* approaches, which challenge the hegemony of white abstract knowledge from the academy (e.g., Stanfield, 1994). These alternative epistemologies celebrate diverse community understandings and seek to emancipate academically oppressed, or silenced, ways of being and knowing. For example, Lather (2006) describes Daa'iyah Saleem's research utilizing a god-centric epistemology in which her Islamic beliefs are not separated from, but are used to inform, her methodological and analytical decisions in producing a case study of a Muslim teacher. The strength of applying a worldviews interpretation of paradigm to methodology in psychology is that it has the potential to raise awareness of overarching intra-disciplinary assumptions, and the new voices approaches may provide essential challenges to disciplinary complacency. It is, however, difficult to see how paradigm proliferation, and the potential disciplinary fragmentation entailed, could be more generally productive for psychological science.

### Conclusion

This article has provided an overview of qualitative methods in psychology. We have provided a structured overview of the range of data collection and analytic methods available, explored how diversity within this field can be conceptualized in terms of paradigmatic frame, and critically reviewed possible ways in which qualitative research might be positioned within psychological science. In so doing, we have paid particular attention to finding ways of increasing communication between researchers specializing in different methods, particularly between those specializing in qualitative or quantitative approaches.

Donmoyer's (2001) categorization of the different ways in which the paradigm concept can be understood, alongside the work of Morgan (2007), allows us to identify possible configurations for research practice in psychology on a continuum of paradigm integration and to specify associated criteria for judging intermethod coherence (Figure 1). This systematization reveals that the dominant interpretation in the social sciences, that is, that of paradigms as epistemological stances, leads to relatively large paradigm differentiation. As we have demonstrated, alternative, and potentially more integrative, positions are available that have less numerous and, possibly, less stringent criteria on which to differentiate paradigms. Our schematic also allows us to see the possibility for additional configurations at any point in Figure 1, which may provide

even better frameworks for methodological integration than those already identified. For example, increasingly sophisticated integrative rationales are being developed within organizational, educational, and policy research (e.g., Greene et al., 1989; Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Schultz & Hatch, 1996) that could catalyze a new level or dimension.

In sum, we believe that psychological science would benefit from better integration of research methods and paradigms. This may be particularly true for qualitative research because standoffs between specialists will tend to serve the dominant, and relatively unified, quantitative methodologies, and there appears to be a will to explore, at least the potential of, methodological pluralism in psychology. For example, Tebes (2000) represents different perspectives on the value of methodological pluralism in *American Psychologist*, Walsh-Bowers (2002) reports opinion across a range of Canadian psychology departments to be supportive of the approach, and Hardy and Barkham (2006) use the term to denote their policy as incoming editors of key British Psychological Society journal the *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*. The challenge for psychological researchers everywhere is to be open to alternative perspectives and to seek common ground where it can be found without lapsing into overhomogenization.

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