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Qualitative Quality and the Importance of Play: Reflections on the Big-Tent Model

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Tracy's (2010) big-tent model is a well-established, highly cited approach for assessing qualitative quality with eight criteria: a) worthy topic, b) rich rigor, c) sincerity, d) credibility, e) resonance, f) significant contribution, g) ethics, and h) meaningful coherence. In this piece, we reflect on the big-tent model's functions, strengths, and recent extensions. Looking forward, we highlight the importance of play in producing excellent qualitative research and creating space for methodological innovation. Examples of play and what it can look like in qualitative research are included.

Keywords: big-tent model, qualitative quality, play

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1. Introduction

Imagining Qualitative Criteria: Which Path to Take?

Authored by Rebecca B. Leach

A cobblestone path, trodden by many before.

A big tent, a sweeping canvas with respite and shade.

A spiral staircase, a never-ending climb, always more.

A narrow road, guardrails in place, tolls to be paid.

Some maps are too rigid, others unclear.

Some are black and white, others blindingly bright.

Ask for directions from those who are near,

Listen closely and loosely, walk together or alone.

Signs point to rigor, reliability, and reflexivity,

Destinations or bridges? Ends or means?

Lean on the familiar, or embrace the unknown?

Practice and train, or just start walking?

The path to high-quality qualitative research can be fraught with uncertainty, especially as various—and sometimes conflicting—definitions, values, and practices offer different possibilities for what constitutes “excellent” and “rigorous” qualitative research (Riazi et al., 2023). In Tracy’s (2010) big-tent model, high-quality qualitative research is characterized by: a) worthy topic, b) rich rigor, c) sincerity, d) credibility, e) resonance, f) significant contribution, g) ethics, and h) meaningful coherence. These eight criteria serve as qualitative ends—universal markers of qualitative quality and a useful shorthand for qualitative researchers. By distinguishing qualitative ends from qualitative mean practices (such as thick description or self-reflexivity), researchers can embrace a variety of methodologies, practices, and skills in pursuit of quality research.

While the big-tent model is not intended to be a rigid cookbook or recipe for qualitative research (Pratt et al., 2022), reflecting on the functions and opportunities of the big-tent model is worthwhile in light of critiques and conversations about the value of systematic criteria (Bochner, 2000, 2018; Morse, 2015). Given the big-tent model’s emphasis on various qualitative means, it is uniquely positioned to be playful, imaginative, and responsive to the ever-changing landscape of qualitative research. In this essay, we offer a brief overview of the big-tent model and its recent extensions, and we further the conversation by underscoring the importance of play in producing excellent qualitative research. In doing so, we hope to disrupt the dichotomous logic that universal guidelines and criteria are incompatible with play and flexibility.

2. A Brief Overview of the Big-Tent Model and Recent Extensions

At its core, the big-tent model presents a meaningful distinction between qualitative *ends* (outcomes) and qualitative *means* (methods, practices, and skills used to generate desired outcomes). The eight criteria of the big-tent model are the qualitative ends or “universal hallmarks of quality” (Tracy, 2010, p. 839) that often characterize excellent qualitative research: a) worthy topic, b) rich rigor, c) sincerity, d) credibility, e) resonance, f) significant contribution, g) ethics, and h) meaningful coherence. To achieve such ends, Tracy (2010, 2024) identifies various means and practices that researchers can utilize to suit their needs and methodological background. Through this conceptual distinction between ends and means, the big-tent model is necessarily phronetic (i.e., focused on generating practical wisdom), context-driven, and researcher-driven.

Whereas some qualitative criteria describe specific steps for conducting qualitative research that are distinct to certain methodologies (e.g., Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gioia et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the big-tent model supports multiple ways of thinking and doing all throughout the research process. For example, credibility might be achieved through thick description, triangulation or crystallization (depending on paradigmatic preferences), multivocality, and/or (multilingual) member reflections (Riazi et al., 2023; Tracy, 2010). Ethical research is not a neat image of morality, but an encompassing end-goal that involves procedural, situational, relational, and exiting ethics. The big-tent model also invites researchers to examine the seemingly subjective—ideas of what it means to have a “worthy topic” or “significant contribution”—by articulating how their research is relevant, timely, interesting, and significant through conceptual, practical, moral, methodological, or heuristic contributions (Tracy, 2010).

The big-tent model embraces possibility, and that spirit is further evidenced by recent extensions of the model. Recognizing that qualitative templates can sometimes feel restrictive, limit innovativeness, and obfuscate the raw and messy nature of qualitative research (Köhler et al., 2022), it is encouraging to reflect on the ways that the big-tent model continues to grow and serve as a staunch advocate for methodological plurality. In particular, promising extensions of the big-tent model include intersectionality, method-specificity, and reexamining the relationship between researcher and data (Leach et al., 2025; Tracy, 2025).

Intersectionality can guide researchers to new materialist, feminist, Indigenous, queer, post-critical, and post-anthropocentric perspectives that situate and rupture oppressive logics in qualitative inquiry. Method-specificity allows researchers to pair specific criteria with specific methods, providing moments where we might favor partiality and incompleteness over certainty and credibility. For example, favored techniques like member reflections may

not be an appropriate fit for organizational autoethnography, where exiting and relational ethics could take precedence to protect participants' identities (López & Tracy, 2020). Conversely, scholars invested in narrative research might consider the value of using visual tools like timelines to add clarity to complex stories (Ku, 2025). Finally, in reexamining the relation between researcher and data, we can regularly interrogate the researcher's role, biases, and ways of doing that may impact the ethics, innovation, and assemblage of qualitative research. Again, while the big-tent model is an extensive consideration of best practices and end goals in qualitative research, it does not claim to be exhaustive or rigid in its pursuit of quality.

3. Moving the Big-Tent Model Forward: The Importance of Play

As we reflect upon the often unsaid and underappreciated aspects of qualitative quality, we invite readers to revisit the concept of play (and neighboring concepts like imagination, wonder, and nonsense) in all aspects of the research process. Scholars have argued that the essence of qualitative research—though “always alive, always becoming”—is the messy, nonlinear combination of “work/think/play” (Hughes et al., 2018, p. 600). Conversations about qualitative quality abound with scripts and templates that provide structure to qualitative inquiry, thereby creating an image of what is normative in theory, design, collection, and analysis. Playing with our expectations, our process, and our practices provides space for radical self-reflexivity and growth.

What does play in qualitative research look like? At the broadest level, play could involve any activity we find engaging and intrinsically rewarding—any way of nursing creativity, resisting hegemonies, and reflecting on practice that could serve “as a form of academic self-maintenance” (Wolgemuth et al., 2018, p. 719). And, when qualitative researchers engage in participant observation, instead of fieldwork, they could just as easily call it “fieldplay due to the adventure, curiosity, and playfulness that occur during these experiences” (Tracy, 2024, p. 142).

Play can be instilled in our data immersion and conversations with colleagues—turning our research into a game of charades, treating initial reflections like a podcast, or engaging in team transcription (Tagg & Manford, 2025). Play can be the doodle in your fieldnotes, the collage of sticky notes made into something new, a secret poem that captures your thoughts and feelings, or a drawing from which you derive metaphors and narrative (Tracy & López, in press).

Likewise, criteria for qualitative research do not need to be an entirely serious matter. They grow and change not only through rigorous reviews of literature, rational consideration of new research directions, or through scholarly debate and critique. They can also emerge through frivolity. Just for

fun, we entered a draft of this article into a closed AI system along with several other information written by us about the big-tent model. We then prompted with this question: “In the spirit of play, provide some jokes about the big tent model. These jokes should be provocative and help us think of new directions” (OpenAI, 2025). As a result, it gave us the following. Note: we chose only a portion of the jokes offered.

☺ *BIG TENT JOKES WITH A THEORETICAL TWIST*

Generated by ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025)

1. Why did the qualitative researcher bring a ladder to the Big Tent?

Because they heard resonance was all about *reaching higher meaning*.

☞ Playfully critiques the idea that qualitative quality is about elevation or hierarchy—what if it’s about deeper digging instead?

2. What did the fieldnote say to the researcher at midnight?

“Are you being sincere, or just coding for it?”

☞ Raises the thorny issue of performative reflexivity—what’s authentic and what’s performatively “authentic”?

3. What’s the difference between a Big Tent researcher and a magician?

The magician pulls rabbits out of hats. The researcher pulls themes out of sticky notes.

☞ Challenges taken-for-granted assumptions about inductive analysis and the construction of meaning.

From this playful interchange, we can begin thinking about how play, especially jokes that experiment with scholarly language, are more than amusement. Rather, they function as shorthand critiques, disrupting taken-for-granted assumptions through surprise and irony. In the context of the big-tent model, jokes can poke fun at the solemnity that often surrounds conversations about quality, reminding us that frameworks are human-made, flexible, and open to revision. A punchline, like a good analytic insight, pivots our perspective. For example, as demonstrated above, the jokes serve to transform “themes from sticky notes” into magic tricks and challenge the performativity of reflexivity by offering it as a midnight fieldnote quip. Play like this invites us to laugh *at* and *with* our methods, and in doing so, create space for new understandings, playful critique, and methodological innovation—ever widening and transforming what we can mean by qualitative quality.

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