

**RESEARCH NOTE ON ETHICS AND QUALITY AS RELATED TO PARADIGM AND METHODS:
AN EXAMPLE OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS UNDER CRITICAL REALISM*****Olivier Fuchs**

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Abstract

Research ethics and quality assurance are often treated as given in any context, for instance by following recommendations like the ones from the EU or the American Psychological Association (APA)(European Union, 2013; APA, 2017) and applying quality criteria as from the seminal work by Lincoln and Guba (1985). However, this research note is describing reflections on a case study based on a critical realist stance, using qualitative interviews and thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) in order to illustrate the importance of adapting ethics and quality-related measures to one's research paradigm and methods. Using this specific example, the paper describes operationalising research ethics by showing the related considerations as commanded or influenced by the critical realist paradigm and thematic analysis of case study interviews in order to illustrate how these reflections have repercussions on the final research design and influence its application. It is argued that by making the closely related topics of ethics, reflexivity and quality assurance a constant part of the research journey and applying related measures thoroughly, results can be improved in order to derive well-founded recommendations generated on an ethical basis. In order to achieve this, all related measures should be documented in detail.

Keywords: Research ethics, quality assurance, quality criteria, research paradigm, methodology and ethics

INTRODUCTION

While also cultural and often presented as following a framework given in all circumstances, ethical considerations are closely related to method and methodology and should guide the research design and governance Roberts *et al.* (2009). Most available literature on research ethics concentrates on dealings with objects or participants in a study, especially when considered vulnerable. However, there are also more general aspects to be considered, also around quality assurance which is closely associated with ethics (Koschnitzke, McCracken and Pranulis, 1992; Damavandi, Zameni and Taghvaei Yazdi, 2019). Next to research design and method application, this includes criteria directly related to the philosophical paradigm ruling the research (Healy and Perry, 2000). This research note shows the reflections on a case study based on a critical realist stance, using qualitative interviews and thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), applying it to the results according to more recent recommendations (Braun, Clarke and Rance, 2014; Braun and Clarke, 2019). The participants were business consultants, none of which belonging to a group which can be considered vulnerable or requiring special protection. The aim is to focus on ethical and research quality related considerations as commanded or influenced by the critical realist paradigm and the methodology in order to illustrate how these reflections affect research design and application.

Ethical issues and reflective considerations

No specific application of methodology and method may start before making sure that ethics, reflexivity and quality assurance have been given thought, an issue to be taken into

account also in peer review or thesis supervision (Richards, 2010; Walker, Holloway and Wheeler, 2005). It goes without saying that any (European) research is to be conducted according to recommendations from the EU and the APA (European Union, 2013; APA, 2017) and needs to respect the European data protection rules from 2018, GDPR, and in the UK the corresponding Data Protection Act 2018. Notwithstanding, this can only form a basis. Rich (2013) introduces the concept of *prima facie*-rights. Based on an observers' values, certain things are „good“ at first view. However, dilemmas may occur, for instance: does one base such an assessment on principles or case by case? On top of that, there are voices which postulate that research can and should not be value-neutral as a matter of principle (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Bhaskar according to Lacey, 1997). This allows a first glimpse at the complexity of ethics, but certain standards for researchers on how to go forward in research have developed. For the study under discussion, some general ones as well as issues around interviewing were the most relevant.

The code of conduct of the APA (2017, pp. 3-4) lays out general principles, namely:

- Research should be beneficial, ideally also to the research subject (Hammersley (1990) even expects research to have “public relevance”)
- No harm may be done
- Integrity, e.g. honesty and the avoidance of fraud
- Justice and fairness and
- Respecting peoples' rights and dignities

This is then detailed in a large number of ethical standards. Translating general principles, authors like Christians (2005) name as traditional rules of ethic researching informed consent, no deception, assuring privacy and confidentiality and

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accuracy, and they call for ensuring multivocal and cross-cultural representation wherever appropriate, to which Creswell (2009) adds that also the research problem and purpose might present issues and that consent might also have to be obtained from people around the subjects. In a screening of 90 articles on ethics in interviewing, Allmark *et al.* (2009) stress rules like avoiding harm, taking into account politics and power structures (mainly when dealing with vulnerable groups). They also caution about an eventual dual role of the interviewer, potentially leading to over-involvement. Indeed, the fact that an interviewer cannot be a pure observer and research subjects are not just detached providers of information means that the values and ethical beliefs of the people involved will have an effect on the research (Baptiste, 2001) and moral convictions are important (Christians, 2005; Cairns *et al.*, 2021) and need to be taken into account. Even so, a totally detached, value-neutral approach is not only very challenging, it might actually not be desirable at all. Smith (1992) calls for the researcher taking a moral stance and there might situations in which a researcher would be called to breaking iron rules such as confidentiality (Allmark *et al.*, 2009). Even when adopting an utilitarian approach, searching for the best consequences (Rich, 2013) and accepting that what entails “good” consequences is therefore ethically acceptable (*prima facie* making value neutrality possible (Christians, 2005)) a totally reserved and unconcerned approach is difficult to imagine. However, there are many pitfalls, and reasons for unethical behaviour do not only lie in capacity related problems: they can also be structural or even have reasons based on a researchers character (Cairns *et al.*, 2021). Institutionalised control such as universities’ ethics committees cannot recognise all issues (Tinker and Coomber, 2005). Additional peer reviews, while useful when well applied, add to the complexity and slowness of the control process (Page and Nyeboer, 2017). There are calls for streamlining and modernising current processes (Hoffman, 2021), but reviewers might also be biased or subject to unethical behaviour such as fake reviews (Horbach and Halffman, 2019). Constant self-reflection is therefore crucial and can be supported by keeping a reflexive journal (Craddock *et al.*, 2019) as the study did. In addition, participants were asked to review the findings and discussion chapters in order to make sure their input was reproduced correctly and did contain no more confidential or sensitive information.

There is not much specific literature on ethics around in-depth interviewing, but interviewing shares many issues with other ways of collecting data and cannot be regarded, as some do, as having few ethical risks (Allmark *et al.*, 2009). Building rapport and trust is important (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018), as well as making sure there is no feeling of hierarchy between interviewee and researcher (Clarke, 2006), which was important in this case, especially with younger participants, as the interviewer was a former senior consulting manager. For the study, many aspects dealing with the vulnerability of research subjects did not apply: business consultants generally do not belong to a vulnerable group of people. However, there are recommendations on how to interview business elites (Ma, Seidl and McNulty, 2021) and some important measures need to be taken, like using pseudonyms, informing participants on all necessary details of the research project, its scope and purpose, ensuring also process consent and in general protecting participants (Allmark *et al.*, 2009). They also recommend the use of quotes. Rashid *et al.* (2019) explicitly add the importance of avoiding deception, also stressed by

Creswell (2009) who connects this with using unbiased language and giving as much detail on the research itself. If possible, the situation of a participant should improve (in the case discussed in this article, this could be achieved by sharing the results of the research) and harm through disclosure of data avoided. It is also important to make sure that there is no discrepancy between expectations of interviewees and the actual use of data (Hammersley, 2013). Debriefs with participants add to transparency and accuracy, data ownership needs to be clarified and data protection assured. Howitt (2010) also emphasises the importance of data protection around interviewing, for which the European Commission also sets standards (European Union, 2013) and regulations like the GDPR. In the present case, data protection considerations meant keeping all electronic data within the influence of the university and its data security measures, keeping all paper based data in a lockable cupboard only accessible to entitled parties and deleting any data that might have been attached to mails or transferred via the internet immediately after reception.

Regarding consent, although Christians (2005) advocates a peer-to-peer supervision regime only, adherence to practices like using consent forms clearly is the established way and needs to be observed and are required by most academic institutions (Gray *et al.*, 2017). It is, however, important to make sure that consent is informed, which also means taking into account cultural differences when communication ones’ approach and aims (Reid *et al.*, 2021). Consent forms explaining the research were used and the interviewees had also been briefed before the interview actually started. Participants remained anonymous, with only little and indispensable information disclosed. Transcripts were reviewed by the interviewees and for the sake of clarity, validity and accuracy, research results are shared with them. Following the recommendations by O’Toole *et al.* (2018), any recordings of interviews were deleted after the study was finalised, and participants were duly informed of all these measures. Participants could also withdraw their consent anytime and demand deletion or destruction of any data provided by them, as indeed happened with one participant.

Thinking about ethical standards automatically links into the topic of reflexivity, which is closely connected to it, witness for instance the role of the interviewer and the potential bias he/she might cause (Allmark *et al.*, 2009; Loosveldt and Beullens, 2014), thus affecting accuracy. Smith and Elger (2014), linking into Archer (1998a), argue that while interviews are a valuable means of data collection for critical realist researchers, special challenges regarding reflexivity apply and reflections around the reflexivity of research subjects need to be taken into account when trying to get to the bottom of social or any “real” structures, as critical realist researchers aim to do. Some of these challenges turn around the difficulty of identifying what is relevant or actually real, as it is for instance difficult to distinguish between necessary and accidental occurrences (Bhaskar, 1978; Bhaskar, 1998) and when researching social dynamics, even their description is a result of personal interpretation (Noonan, 2008). Coming from a more constructionist standpoint, Fontana and Frey (2005) also argue that when interpreting interview results, one has to clearly understand the role and impact of the researcher. It is difficult to get the balance between actors’ perceptions and the own role right and to know when to move from analysis of dense data to analysis and generalisation. There are even allegations that case study research is always biased by the

researcher, but Teegavarapu, Summers and Mocko (2008) refute this by stating that this can be addressed by using falsification logic, different sources of data or triangulation. However, some issues remain, for instance, the interviewer in the present case being a consultant like the participants might lead to taking certain things for granted which might lead to biased interpretations. While studying familiar topics in familiar surroundings, access to topics and subjects may be simple, but studying what one knows well carries the risk of self-involvement, lack of distance and of using prefabricated opinions when interpreting statements (Berger, 2015). On the other hand, Ryan *et al.* (2012) think that because any knowledge, according to Critical Realism, is theory-laden, a researcher may use his/her own experience as a source of data. On the other hand, differences in experiences or culture also can lead to bias and there are examples of researchers having to adapt ethical standards to the cultural environment they were working in (Gray *et al.*, 2017). This is especially relevant for paradigms which allow – at least in part – social construction of reality might be experienced as different from how it would be experienced in other cultures. There are proposals for toolkits to support the integrity and ethical action in research in multicultural environments (Reid *et al.*, 2021), and they confirm the experiences from the present case that ethical considerations need to accompany research throughout and require regular reflection. There is a risk of getting things wrong, interpreting too early or universalising conclusions (Noonan, 2008) – and in critical realism, generalisation only has contextual value anyway (O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014). However, in order to avoid these pitfalls, reflexive journals, a reflexive process accompanying the research journey, reviews by peers and participants and a thorough application of ethical standards will help and allow the critical realist research to become a clearer view of the elements of reality. On top of that, potential bias was addressed by cognisant interaction with the literature and interviewees as well as stating own values where relevant (Sobh and Perry, 2006).

Ensuring Quality

Due to the complex (and constantly changing) reality, critical realist research is what Healy and Perry (2000) call “modified objectivist”, i.e. findings will only be probably true, and the world is only apprehensible using probabilities, although not necessarily statistical ones. Reality is determined by multiple factors; thus one can only look for potential mechanisms (O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014). While critical realist researchers are value aware, they have to work cautiously, be aware of the fact that some facts cannot be observed (Gray, 2014) and take many potential causal powers, their dependencies and relationships into account, as well as the differences between natural and social reality (in the existence which, of course, one has to believe) (Archer, 1998b). Applying a critical realist paradigm in epistemology therefore requires caution and thoroughness. A critical realist stance may help to exclude the danger of dogmatism inherent to social constructionism, but the researcher will need to make sure to get right what is real (Taylor, 2018). The “real” can also change, there are transitive elements to knowledge (Bhaskar, 1998) and humans also transform things (Fleetwood, 2014). An important question always is whether what one sees is what there is. Choosing the right approaches to analysing is therefore crucial – as is reflexivity (Sobh and Perry, 2006). As Outhwaite (1987, p. 37) writes: while critical realism is bold ontologically, it is epistemologically cautious.

Quality assurance will have to take into account all the research stages as described above and map it with the critical research approach. Doing the latter is a response to a quality criterion in itself: ensuring the relationship of quality assurance and research strategy (Bryman, 2016). Here, the quality criteria for qualitative work have to be taken into account, and updating the seminal work by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Cohen and Crabtree (2006) present the four criteria of

- Credibility, the “truth value” of the findings: can one be confident the results reflect the truth, in this case at least as much as critical realism allows, as any explanation of the truth is fallible (Fletcher, 2016)
- Transferability (or applicability), which means that findings have to be applicable at least in similar contexts
- Dependability or consistency, somewhat like reliability in quantitative research (Bryman, 2016), showing that given a similar environment, the findings could be repeated
- Confirmability or neutrality, which means that results have to come from the research objects and not be distorted in any way

In order to ensure a work meets this criteria, a researcher will have to apply a number of techniques, e.g. audit trails or reflexivity (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006), making the link between ethics and quality assurance visible. Some sources, however, structure differently: Frost and Bailey-Rodriguez (2019) name as overarching principles rigour (carefulness, thoroughness plus systematic approach) and validity, which they more or less equate with credibility as defined by Lincoln and Guba, and add quality criteria which are similar to what above was describes as “techniques”, adding coherence – which is similar to dependability – and value, containing elements of transferability. Other criteria are reliability (can results be repeated?), the somewhat similar replication (will other researchers get to the same results?), validity and many other related or overlapping keywords, (Bryman, 2016; Reynolds *et al.*, 2011). There are several aspects to validity which are relevant for qualitative studies. Internal validity, for instance, turns around causality and is therefore especially important to the critical realist researcher with the focus on agency and an abductive/retroductive (the latter corroborating the results of the former) approach (Rutzou, 2016; Edwards, O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014). Bryman adds external validity which reminds one of transferability, ecological validity (can findings be applied in peoples' everyday environment, less important here as this is what this thesis looks at specifically) and inferential validity with similarities to parts of what is described as neutrality above. There is also a stakeholder view of quality criteria, meaning that the interests of communities like interviewees also need to be taken into account (Howe and Eisenhart, 1990). The concept of validity (“verification” for Creswell (1998, p. 201)) leads to the methodology stages. Yin (2018), focusing on case study designs, proposes to test these for construct, internal and external validity as well as reliability. All these have repercussions on the research design, data collection and analysis. Some issues around data collection through interviews have already been discussed above, but for the study interviews were conducted over a period of over one year, in different phases of the COVID-pandemic, which might have affected the perspective of participants. Asking them to read all the findings, including what other participants had said, was a means to address this. In addition, all the answers have to be interpreted with caution as answers to retrospective questions are not necessarily fully

reliable (Hipp *et al.*, 2020) and important aspects of the topic might have been omitted by interviewees. One step further, Nowell *et al.* (2017) concentrate on quality around the application of thematic analysis (TA) and group a number of criteria and techniques under the label of “trustworthiness”. They then map these and a number of additional techniques against the six phases of TA as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), who also highlight the importance to take a number of decisions before the start, including the philosophical stance. For the study under discussion, the relevant decisions were those shown in table I:

Table I. Decisions to be taken before starting to apply TA

Decision to be taken	Solution for the study
Defining, what counts as a theme	Different criteria may apply, and Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise that it is a judgement matter. Prevalence, measured not only by numbers but also by the depth and extent of what participants told around the type of data will be the defining criterion. Ryan and Bernard (2003) also recommend to look for similarities and differences or missing elements.
Deciding whether to look at a rich description or a detailed account of one aspect	Within the focus of the thesis, and according to critical realist standards - the "thick" description of what is found (Ryan <i>et al.</i> , 2012), the first option is chosen.
Choosing between inductive or theoretical TA, i.e. bottom up with no pre-existing coding frame or more analyst and theory driven	The "inductive", data driven way better fits the search for a rich description as well as CR principles, with the reservation that as described above, the approach will be more abductive.
Choosing whether to define themes by semantic criteria (looking for explicit, visible meanings) or latent ones, investigating what lies behind the semantic data content	The study was looking for patterns or demi-regularities (as in Fletcher, 2016) in order to find not only the best solutions for the aspect of crisis management it investigates, but also reasons and the embedding of any mechanisms and events in their context, which is why latent themes have to be looked for.

Thematic analysis then should move forward in clearly defined stages starting with the familiarisation with the data until the final write-up. Moving back and forth between the stages in order to review, validate or re-structure results is, however, encouraged as long as it is done consciously (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2013). In this context, it is important to see that themes do not emerge. They depend on their conceptualisation by the researcher and the research focus and thus are created from the data (Braun, Clarke and Rance, 2014; Braun and Clarke, 2019). The emergence of findings thus happens from the themes, not as the themes.

The method was later refined, mainly in order to make some assumptions not explicitly stated in the initial definition clear, also acknowledging that TA might not be as universally applicable as first stated. Different approaches were described, amongst which and reflexive TA, with an open, flexible and looping approach to generating codes (Braun and Clarke, 2018) and recommended especially when searching for latent themes as was the case in the study discussed here. It also leaves more room for interpretation and the search for meaning beyond the obvious and thus lends itself well to the typical investigation for demi-regularities critical realist researchers pursue (Fletcher, 2016). In addition, quality assurance also needs to take into account limitations of the chosen methodology and methods, for example as explicitly enumerated by Braun and Clarke (2006) around TA. Linking into research ethics is also their repeated emphasising of the importance of reflecting initial decisions and, based on them, the need to apply the method very consistently. When analysing the findings, reflections on the limitations of coding are also needed. Coding already is interpretation and the data – and their interpretation – show only fragments of the topic under scrutiny, potentially overmuch so (Hedlund-DeWitt, 2013). Coding by different people, second and even third rounds of coding and analytical memos can address this (Rogers, 2018). The study researched communication aspects of crisis management, and there were also some relevant quality criteria

related to this topic. For research on crisis management, there is for instance an emphasis on the importance of internal and external stakeholders (Bundy *et al.*, 2017), which leads to the contextual analysis so important to critical realist researchers. Some criteria are especially important in Critical Realism, and Healy and Perry (2000) establish a set of paradigm related criteria, which are, however, overlapping with most of the criteria mentioned above. These are: ontological appropriateness (the research problem needs to deal with a social phenomenon), contingent validity (dealing with open systems, linked with internal validity and “truth value”),

an epistemological criterion of value aware research (“multiple perception”, mapped with neutrality/confirmability), methodological trustworthiness (similar to consistency, reliability, dependability), analytical generalisation (related to external validity) and lastly construct validity. Some research techniques for validation of results, e.g. empirical corroboration or applying causal test questions to results, may be the answer to these issues (Wynn and Williams, 2012, citing Runde, 1998), as is triangulation. Critical realists use peoples’ conception of phenomena, then from this infer conditions for the said phenomena (Kaidesoja, 2009). In addition to that, some patterns – empirical regularities – can be found by other means of analysis to become less abstract. Thus, at least some triangulation might be necessary. However, for the study under discussion, the possibilities for triangulation were limited because of COVID-related contact restrictions to on-site observation and the absence of additional materials. However, the study tapped into some additional sources of information such as publications by consultancies. The lack of possibilities to triangulate can also be at least partially remedied by asking different questions (Sobh and Perry, 2006), to which one can add asking several different people.

For the study, a table with an overview of the recommended techniques by research phase and whether and how they were to be applied was created. Next to these techniques or measures, it contained the quality criteria addressed, the source where these criteria were found, the paradigm or methodology element they related to and the way they had to be applied. The validation of the results of the study by the participants was added as a further tool of quality assurance. Finally, one of the main methodological concerns from a critical realist perspective is, that causality, the “why” question as advocated by Healy and Perry (2000), was not the central focus of the study. However, the application of the techniques as mentioned in the table and the example of other work with a focus on “what works” (Williams, Rycroft-Malone and Burton, 2016, p. 7) addresses this.

Conclusion

Ensuring quality is clearly part of reflexivity, and the study discussed in this research note did treat it as an overarching principle, with a number supporting measures such as reflexive journals as techniques. The main principle around the – closely related – reflection and addressing of ethical and quality topics was to not only look at these aspects overall but to make them part of the research journey and address issues pertaining to the philosophical paradigm, the topic of the study and methodology and method separately in order to ensure that all relevant aspects were reflected and addressed where possible and any gaps were identified and named. Some sources on paradigms and methodology used in this example do explicitly talk about related ethical issues and questions about quality and reflexivity, thus offering a guideline. However, there are different elements to a research where specific recommendations apply, and they have to be treated as a whole. In this case, measures relating to critical realism as the paradigm, case studies, interviews and thematic analysis had to be taken into account. , and creating a table of measures by research phase, from set-up to write up, proved helpful. Aware of the fact that different context might lead to different results (Sobh and Perry, 2006), this was taken into account in the analysis and also called for thorough application of the analytical method, in this case thematic analysis. The impression was that the thoroughness in managing ethics, quality and method application was instrumental in achieving reliable results and being able to derive well-founded recommendations.

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