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ThinkBox

From aseptic distance to passionate engagement: reflections about the place and value of participatory inquiry

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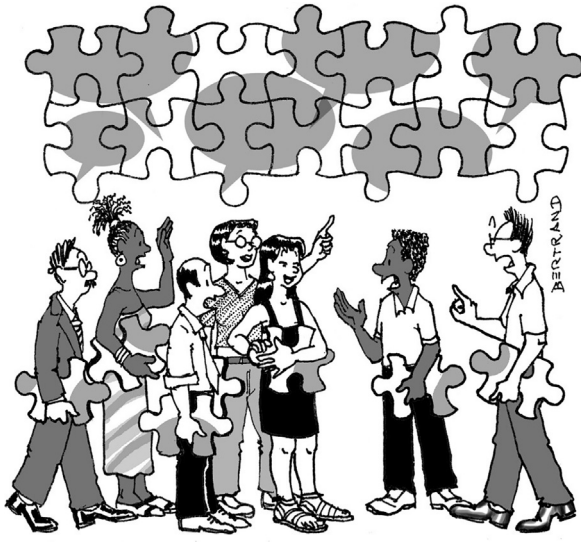
Abstract

In 2004, I published a book chapter that marked a first moment in my qualitative research journey. The methodological piece was a result of a challenge imposed by my doctoral committee for my thesis proposal defense two years prior, who invited me to 'rigorously' sustain the quality of a qualitative research project conducted under the premises of critical-interpretivism. This challenge indeed was a gift, as it provided me an opportunity, very early in my academic career, to deeply reflect about the meaning of doing qualitative research. Now, around fifteen years later, the invitation to write a thinkbox again represents a timely opportunity, as I found myself again reflecting . . . not on the dilemmas of doing non-mainstream qualitative research, but on the researcher's role itself. More precisely, I am seriously thinking about the role of distance and engagement to the value of the knowledge we produce with our academic work. In this essay, I redraw this entire journey—from 2004 to 2018—with the intent to nourish the dialog with my peers about the engagement of the academic community with transforming society for the better, and to provide some guidelines to doctoral students seeking to truly engage with transformational research.



Introduction

One of the biggest challenges regarding qualitative research in the social sciences domain is related to mutual understanding and respect among different research traditions. In 2004, I published a first methodological piece reporting my personal experience with doing critical interpretive research in an academic environment dominated by the positivistic tradition. The chapter, called "*Conducting and evaluating critical interpretive research: examining 'criteria' as a key component in building a research tradition"* (Pozzebon, 2004), was written as an answer to the members of my doctoral committee, who encouraged me to present research criteria to legitimate a study that was not conducted under the well-known positivistic principles of objectivity-reliability-validity.

Nine years later, an adapted chapter, translated into the Portuguese language, was published in a methodological book—"*Critérios para condução e avaliação de pesquisas qualitativas de natureza crítico-interpretativa"* (Pozzebon & Petrini, 2013)—which sought to extend this relevant discussion to the

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Brazilian community. Finally, in 2014, a revised and extended article was accepted for publication in an international journal under the title "*Dialogical principles for qualitative research: a nonfoundational path*" (Pozzebon, Rodriguez, & Petrini, 2014). This last work put forward more substantial reflection about distinct visions of the nature and value of qualitative inquiry, delving deeply into the roots of non-foundationalism that encompasses intellectual traditions like critical interpretivism, hermeneutics, post-structuralism, post-modernism, and feminism, to cite a few.

Those three publications reflect my academic effort in trying to provide principles for helping qualitative researchers to affirm and support the quality of their work in contexts where the positivistic orientation is still prominent. Those principles have helped to pave the way for qualitative researchers who struggle to have their non-positivistic roots of conducting qualitative inquiry accepted as valid (Pozzebon, 2017). In this essay, I would like to proceed with this journey by adding an additional dimension that goes beyond the ontological/epistemological debate. In recent years, more than being attracted and inspired by constructivist, interpretive, and critical positions, I have being deeply seduced by participative ways of conducting qualitative inquiry. I am talking about a research standpoint where the separation between the researcher and other social actors (citizens, militants, users, beneficiaries, or otherwise) become meaningless. The division between the subject (one that investigates) and the object (one that is investigated) somehow disappears. Both subject and object construct purpose and knowledge. The researcher's positioning and values are not just activated to *analyze* or *interpret* social reality, but to *transform* it. Again, and not by chance, this kind of qualitative inquiry is not easily justified as valid in the view of numerous academic communities. The engagement and direct involvement of the researcher is often seen as a barrier to the construction of a legitimate knowledge.

In the next sections, I provide a brief summary of the criteria for foundational, quasi-foundational, and non-foundational research, already reviewed in previous work. I present an overview of the participatory and action research traditions, discussing some of their distinctiveness regarding traditional academic research. Then, I offer a set of principles for those seeking to engage with different styles of participatory inquiry, principles that might be mobilized to justify and claim the academic validity of such a passionate root for transforming social reality.

Criteria for foundational, quasi-foundational, and non-foundational paths

The generation, analysis, and interpretation of empirical materials are processes based on some underlying assumptions about the nature of the reality being examined, and what constitutes valid research (Myers, 1997). These sets of beliefs and values have been called paradigms of inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), theoretical traditions (Prasad & Prasad, 2002), or simply research orientations (Amis & Silk, 2008). Numerous classifications and discussions of such research traditions have been published in recent decades. In this section, I recall the classification proposed by Amis and Silk (2008), who present three different research orientations shaping the work of qualitative researchers: foundationalism, quasi-foundationalism, and non-foundationalism.

The authors define as *foundationalists* those researchers who have adopted criteria rooted in the positivistic paradigm—*internal validity, external validity, reliability*, and *objectivity*—to develop and justify their qualitative work (Amis & Silk, 2008). Foundationalists typically mobilize a set of procedures to minimize bias and subjectivity, procedures that seek to guarantee an accurate reflection of an objective reality (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). The work of Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (1994) represents quite well foundationalist qualitative research. Foundationalist criteria have been often applied by editors and reviewers of the so-called "top-tier" North American journals, and continue to dominate the rules for publication in most well-ranked journals (Pozzebon et al., 2014). Although most prevalent, they are not the only parameters for guiding and judging the value of qualitative work. Here we find the second category of researchers, according to Amis and Silk's (2008) classification—the *quasi-foundationalists*—who "advocate a subtle and non-naive neo-realism that searches for an approximation of reality" (Pozzebon et al., 2014, p. 298). The so-called post-positivists and critical realists typically find a place among quasi-foundationalists. A significant amount of process-based work published in the field of organizations studies could be seen as espousing a quasi-foundationalist rationale as well.

A landmark in the recent history of qualitative inquiry is the publication, by Lincoln and Guba (1985), of four criteria of trustworthiness: *credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.* It is interesting to note that although those trustworthiness criteria were presented as appropriate for naturalistic inquiry, therefore representing an opportune alternative for social-constructivist researchers, they ended up being adopted by the quasi-foundationalists. The main reason is that such a set of criteria, although reflecting a hoped-for rejection of objectivity and value neutrality, was still perceived as paralleling traditional criteria, as a sort of 'realism reclothed' (Garratt & Hodkinson, 1998).

Foundationalism and quasi-foundationalism represent together the dominant orientations of published qualitative work in organization and management research, reflecting the normal science paradigm. This hegemony is legitimized through a number of mechanisms, notably the production of academic journal lists or rankings, imposing "an impression of impartiality and objectivity" but indeed compromising with "particular values enshrined" in their own favored metrics (Wilmott, 2011, p. 430). All those tactics and maneuvers end by killing diversity, innovation and often relevance.

For those moving away from notions of realism and theory-free knowledge, Amis and Silk (2008) define a third research orientation: *non-foundationalism.* Here we find scholars who stress the "ambiguous unstable and context-dependent character of language," and the "political-ideological character of the social sciences" as key components of any reflection about qualitative research (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 1).

More than seeing data and facts as constructions or results of interpretations, non-foundationalists pose a number of considerations about the meaning of interpreting. They acknowledge the multiplicity of possible avenues of interpretations, they refute data-confirming interpretations, they disclose the conditions by which certain interpretations dominate, they seek to recognize silent voices in the building of those interpretations, and they mobilize self-reflection about the role of researchers in favoring certain interpretations over others (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

Unlike the two previous orientations, the situation becomes complex when non-foundationalism comes into play regarding the categorization of the intellectual streams taking part. Although sharing a critique of traditional empirical methodology, non-foundationalism hosts a wide heterogeneity and diversity in terms of intellectual streams. We find several variants of social constructivism and critical theory, post-structuralism, post-modernism, feminism, queer studies, critical hermeneutics, and critical interpretivism, to cite a few. The identification of a "non-foundationalism platform" and its "ground for truth claims on which interpretive truth criteria can be developed" is far from simple in nature (Sandberg, 2005, p. 47). Going even further, a number of scholars have adopted a posture that is "anti-foundational", seeking to go beyond the acceptance of any possible set of criteria for judging the quality of research (Lincoln, 1995). "Criteria are seen by most non-foundationalists as something relational, internalized and negotiated" (Pozzebon et al., 2014, p. 301). I concluded that there are actually as many sets of non-foundationalist criteria as there are non-foundationalist researchers. Some examples compiled from the literature are: criteria for authenticity, including fairness, ontological, educative, catalytic and tactical authenticities (Guba & Lincoln, 1989); critical criteria, including positionality, communitarian, voice, reciprocity and sacredness principles (Lincoln, 1995); pragmatic validity (Kvale, 1995); feminist post-structural validity, including ironic, paralogical, rhizomatic and voluptuous forms of validation (Lather, 2001); reciprocity criteria (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001); truth-based criteria including communicative, pragmatic, and transgressive validities (Sandberg, 2005); and responsibility-based criteria including reductionist and epistemological validities (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010).

Such a plurality is not necessarily wrong or bad, but reflects all the subjectivity and relationality inherent to non-foundationalism. I ended by proposing a set of five principles that attempt the hard task of dialoging with most of the previous and disparate intellectual traditions (Pozzebon et al., 2014). The first three criteria—*authenticity*, *plausibility* and *criticality*—combine what Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) position as central to any work of ethnographic inspiration (i.e. convincingness) with the three first levels of interpretation proposed by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009): description, interpretation and critical thinking. The fourth criterion—*reflexivity*, or reflection on text production and language use—combine a number of influences, such as confessional research (Schultze, 2000) and several variants of critical, post-structural and post-modern studies (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). Finally, because constructivist inquirers and readers emphasize qualitative research as both "science and art" (Patton, 2002, p. 548), we have added a fifth criterion—*artfulness*—influenced by the ideas of Czarniawska (1999). Table 1 summarizes the three sets of criteria, representing the results of this first phase of reflection about doing and publishing qualitative research based on ontological/epistemological distinctiveness. In the next section, I add a new dimension of reflection: distance.

Table 1
Criteria for foundationalists, quasi-foundationalist, and non-foundationalist qualitative research.

Foundational (Ex: positivism)	Quasi-foundational (Ex: post-positivism and critical realism	Non-foundational (Ex: critical-interpretivism)
Internal Validity: The degree to which findings correctly map the phenomenon in question. **External Validity:** The degree to which findings can be generalized to other settings similar to the one in which the study occurred. **Reliability:** The extent to which findings can be replicated or reproduced by another investigator. **Objectivity:** The extent to which findings are free from bias.	**Credibility:** The "truth" of the findings, as viewed through the eyes of those being observed or interviewed and within the context in which the research is carried out. **Transferability:** The extent to which findings can be transferred to other settings (similar contexts). **Dependability:** The extent to which the research would produce similar or consistent findings if carried out as described. **Confirmability:** Researchers need to provide evidence that corroborates the findings.	**Authenticity:** The extent to which the researcher was there. **Plausibility:** The results make sense to the readers. **Criticality:** The text activate readers to re-examine assumptions that underlie their work and criticize the existing social conditions and the distribution of power **Reflexivity:** The author reveal his or her personal role and his or her selection of the voices or actors represented in the text. **Artfulness:** The author mobilize creativity, art, and culture to express or craft his/her ideas.
Reference: Miles and Huberman (1994)	**Reference:** Lincoln and Guba (1985)	**Reference:** Pozzebon (2004), Pozzebon et al. (2014)

Engaging with participatory inquiry orientations

The two previous sections have redrawn a research journey where I present three sets of research criteria for qualitative researchers espousing distinct rationale: foundationalist, quasi-foundationalist, and non-foundationalist. In this section I would like to share my reflections about a dimension that goes beyond the ontological/epistemological debate. This dimension is related to the role of the researchers themselves: the degree of their involvement or engagement with the field. I am talking about the place and legitimacy of participatory forms of inquiry in management and organization studies. Once again I am not entering in a simple and unambiguous area. Behind participatory inquiry and action-based research there are different

Table 2
Philosophical assumptions of participatory inquiry paradigm.

Participatory inquiry paradigm	Adapted from Heron and Reason (1997)
Ontology	Participative reality: subjective-objective and co-created reality.
Epistemology	Critical subjectivity; extended epistemology of experiential, propositional and practical knowing; co-created findings.
Methodology	Political participation in collaborative action inquiry; use of language grounded in shared experiential context.
Axiology	Practical knowing that flourishes with a balance of autonomy and co-operation.
Nature of knowledge	Primacy of practical knowing; critical subjectivity; living knowledge.
Knowledge accumulation	Embedded in communities of inquiry.
Voice	Primary voice manifested through aware self-reflective action: secondary voices in illuminating theory, narrative, movement, song, dance, and other presentational forms.
Training	Co-researchers are initiated into the inquiry process by facilitator/researcher, and learn through active engagement in the process. Facilitators/researchers requires emotional competence and democratic personality.
Hegemony	Emergent and at present essentially countercultural in Western societies.

schools and streams that should be revisited before advancing in the discussion about the 'appropriate criteria'.

Reason and Bradbury (2008) use *action research* as their umbrella term, presenting it as a "family of practices of living inquiry that aims, at a great variety of ways, to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing" (p. 1). I loved when the authors specify that action research does not start from a desire of changing others *out there*, but from an orientation of changing *with others*. This means that within an action research project, communities of inquiry and action evolve together to address issues that are relevant for those who participate as co-researchers. From my perspective, this fundamental feature makes participatory inquiry worthy of being placed at the center of current academic debates. It helps to question the relevance of much academic knowledge regarding the society that finances the production of that knowledge. Action research challenges the presumed position of those researched, who are either the subject of research or recipient of the research results. Instead, they become co-researchers. The process and results of action research might create positive change on a small scale, or affect the lives of millions of people. Despite this transformative role, it is possible to identify a disdainful attitude from mainstream social scientists regarding the 'scientific value' of action research work (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). This undervaluing of participatory inquiries was one of the motivations for writing this essay; in many conversations with Ph.D. students, they have expressed a desire to pursue action research but fear their work will not be accepted by certain academic committees.

This marginal status of action research could also be explained by its history. Although it is not easy to determine the origins of action research, Reason and Bradbury (2008) locate it with the work of Lewin (1946) and other social science scholars by the end of the Second World War. Since the 1940s, the term *action research*, along with similar terms such as *action science*, *action inquiry*, and *action learning*, has been used to describe field work with a dual purpose: promoting practical transformation and advancing knowledge. In addition to Lewin, the work of emancipatory pedagogues like the Brazilian Paulo Freire (1970) is often seen as pioneering participatory inquiries. Reason and Bradbury (2008) observe that neither of these origins is "well-linked to the mainstream of academic research" (p. 3). Put simply, the structure and ethos of universities often work against participatory inquiries, helping to consign the family of practices related to action research to the margins of academia.

In terms of theoretical influences, action research was strongly influenced by pragmatism, critical theory, phenomenology, social constructivism, and liberal humanism. A complete analysis of the similarities and distinctiveness among participatory inquiry, social constructivism, and critical theory is provided by Heron and Reason (1997). In this work, I prefer the term *participatory inquiry* to refer to those ways of doing action inquiry that combine a constructivist epistemology with a critical orientation.

A vast array of different types of action inquiry coexist: participatory action research, feminist participatory research, critical participatory action research, participatory rural appraisal, asset-based community development, participatory learning and action, clinical research, reflective practice, deliberative practice, praxis research, experiential learning, appreciative inquiry, and co-operative inquiry, to mention the most cited (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Tripp, 2005). Within just one of these modalities—participatory action research—Fals-Borda (1977) reports that some 35 varieties of participative action inquiry have been identified worldwide. In most of those methodologies, however, we find the central notion of research cycle (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

For reasons of length, I cannot present in this essay a full account of participatory inquiries methodologies. I end my text by providing two important elements to colleagues and graduate students seeking to engage with participative methods. The first is a summary of the philosophical assumptions of participatory inquiry (Table 2), according to the view of Heron and Reason (1997). As previously mentioned, there are different schools under the umbrella called participatory or action-based research. The view proposed by the authors is probably prominent, but does not cover all the different possibilities in terms of positioning within the broad paradigm.

The second is a compilation of some provisional validation criteria (Table 3) that could be mobilized to justify the validity of the participatory research work. This represents a first step in a reflection that will evolve during the next years.

Table 3
Criteria and principles for participatory and action research.

Participatory action research (PAR)	Canonical action research	Participatory inquiry research
Transparency: all the participants (including the reader) are able to trace the whole process of PAR, its functions, aims, and methods, as much as possible. **Compatibility:** of the aims with the methods and means with which the goals are reached. **Awareness:** the participant researcher could claim that he/she understands deeply the contextual conditions and that he/she has set forth all the aspects he/she become aware of.	**Principle of the Researchers-Practitioners Agreement:** seeks to ensure the development of a mutual understanding of, and commitment, to the research goals. **Principle of the Cyclical Process Model:** advocates progressing through the action research phases in a systematic manner. **Principle of Theory:** highlights the importance of using one or more theories to guide and focus the research activity. **Principle of Change through Action:** seeks that the intervention is appropriate to change an unsatisfactory situation. **Principle of Learning through Reflection:** highlights the importance of drawing insights from the research and identifying implications for other situations and research contexts.	**Congruence** of experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical knowing. **Leads to action to transform** the world in the service of human flourishing. **Recoverability:** To make clear to interested readers the thought processes and models applied in the research process, which enabled other researchers to make their own interpretations and conclusions.
Reference: Moser (1975) apud Swantz (2008)	**Reference:** Davison, Martinsons, and Kock (2004), Lindgren, Henfridsson, and Schultze (2004)	**Reference:** Heron and Reason (1997), Checkland and Holwell (1998)

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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