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Experienced Qualitative Researchers’ Views on Teaching Students Qualitative Research Design

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Abstract

The increasing prominence of qualitative inquiry in psychological research has been accompanied by reflection on teaching and learning practices within undergraduate and postgraduate psychology courses. To date, there is limited empirical understanding of how experienced qualitative researchers approach teaching students about qualitative research design. The present study draws on interviews with qualitative researchers ($N = 12$) from multiple disciplines, occupying various positions within academia. Using thematic analysis, seven themes were developed, under the superordinate theme *present qualitative research as a legitimate approach to enquiry*. The themes illuminate practical pedagogical implications for teaching qualitative research, including introducing qualitative research in bite-sized chunks and initiating students to qualitative inquiry through foundational methods. The findings contextualise the teaching of qualitative methods as a site of multiple tensions, for example, balancing pragmatism and idealism, and providing structure to students while enabling flexibility. Educators and supervisors of qualitative research navigate these tensions in their teaching practice to provide students with what they see as the best possible learning experiences. We call for further research to build a profile of evidence-based pedagogical practice for teaching qualitative research, while also acknowledging the fluidity needed to embrace changing epistemologies, methodologies, methods, and data sources.

**Keywords:** teaching qualitative research; expert views; pedagogy; research design
In the course of the past two decades, qualitative inquiry has achieved a newfound prominence in psychological research (Carrera-Fernández, Guàrdia-Olmos, and Peró-Cebollero, 2014; Wertz, 2014). Recognition of the value of qualitative inquiry is reflected in an increase in the number of specialist academic journals (Ponterotto, 2005; Roberts and Castell, 2016), through the growing interest among students and academics to learn about and practice qualitative approaches (Riley et al., 2019), and though incorporation of qualitative methods into positivist and post-positivist research inquiry via mixed methods research (Ponterotto, Matthew, and Raughly, 2013). Positive shifts in the regard for qualitative psychological inquiry have been supported by seminal publications (Haverkamp, Morrow, and Ponterotto, 2005), and the relatively recent release of Journal Article Reporting Standards for qualitative primary, qualitative meta-analytic, and mixed methods research in psychology (JARS-Qual guidelines) by the American Psychological Association (APA; Levitt et al., 2018), inclusion of qualitative research in the latest version of the APA Publication manual (APA, 2019), specific invitations for qualitative works to be published in academic journals (Roberts and Castell, 2016), and the establishing of communities of practice within professional associations to further practices in qualitative inquiry (Riley et al., 2019).

The contemporary status of qualitative research in psychology is remarkable in the context of the widespread quantitative culture that pervades psychology faculties and institutions (Gibson and Sullivan, 2018; Povee and Roberts, 2014; Rubin, Bell, and McClelland, 2018). For example, research that is positivist or post-positivist in nature is privileged by application criteria for major research funding grants, and more likely to achieve success in securing such funding (Riley et al., 2019). Lack of familiarity with qualitative research leads to the privileging of research paradigms that adhere to hegemonic quality criteria (i.e., suitable for quantitative approaches; Riley et al., 2019). By extension,
Eurocentric, postmodern and patriarchal approaches are constructed as normative (Flick, 2018), and the feminist and critical roots of qualitative research are at risk of marginalisation (Riley et al., 2019).

In the UK a survey of the content of research methods education among 30 undergraduate psychology courses found that 90% listed qualitative methods in their course curricula (TARGET Meta-Research Group, 2020). These figures reflect that qualitative research methods education is a requirement for accreditation of undergraduate psychology courses in the UK (Gibson and Sullivan, 2018). Even so, Riley et al. (2019) argue that there exists an ongoing tokenism in how qualitative research is integrated into UK undergraduate psychology curricula. Wiggins, Gordon-Finlayson, Becker and Sullivan’s (2016) qualitative analysis of interviews with seventeen dissertation supervisors identified a need for greater integration of qualitative research methods education in undergraduate psychology curriculum across North East England and Scotland. While in the US research methods education in undergraduate psychology courses is mandatory, the extent to which curricula include qualitative research methods is unclear (McMullen, 2018). Some suggest that qualitative research methods education in the US within graduate psychology programs specifically (Rubin et al., 2018), and US and Canadian contexts generally (Gergen, Josselson, Freeman, 2015; McMullen, 2018) remains marginalised.

Contemporarily, there is an expanding, but limited body of literature dedicated to the practices of teaching and learning qualitative research in psychology at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. A recent systematic review synthesising findings from 113 journal articles published between 1999 and 2013 on teaching qualitative research methods identified the integration of experiential exercises, practice-based activities, peer and collaborative work among students, adequate access to analysis software, and competency of teaching staff as key aspects (Wagner, Kawulich, and Garner, 2019). Several articles advocated an
apprenticeship style model, particularly for students at the graduate level, in which supervisors and teachers provide individualised instruction and participatory learning opportunities (Wagner et al., 2019). Of note, only 14 of the 113 articles identified in Wagner et al.’s (2019) systematic review were published within psychology discipline journals. Despite a growing collection of resources there is relatively limited literature on how to teach qualitative research in psychology (Gibson and Sullivan, 2018). This limitation extends to Canada and the USA (McMullen and Winston-Proctor, 2018), Europe (Murray, 2019), and our own institutional context, Australia ([reference blinded for review]).

The publication of the JARS-Qual guidelines (Levitt et al., 2018) represents a watershed moment for scholars invested in articulating and exploring the pedagogy of qualitative research specific to the discipline of psychology, as these standards communicate a value, ethic, and broad conceptual principles for the conduct of high quality qualitative research within psychology (Riley et al., 2019). These standards offer researchers an opportunity to move beyond the qualitative-quantitative divide, to excuse themselves from partisan politics, and instead attend to a set of quality criteria that flexibly respond to a diversity of qualitative approaches (Levitt et al., 2018; Riley et al., 2019). For example, the emphasis on an ethic of transparency and contextualisation within these standards is of greater conceptual relevance to qualitative researchers than an inflexible set of universal quality criteria (Riley et al., 2019). The strength of these standards is in providing responsive, accessible, and appropriately contextualised and therefore flexible quality criteria for qualitative and mixed method research. There are initial signs of uptake of these standards as the British Journal of Health Psychology (BJHP) has adopted these guidelines as best practice reporting for new submissions (Shaw et al., 2019). As such, these standards have the potential to support the development of new spaces, practices, and processes for undertaking, teaching, and learning qualitative research in psychology.
While undoubtedly the JARS-Qual guidelines provide a strong framework for the pedagogy of qualitative research practice, empirically based pedagogical practices that honour these guidelines are required. For example, methodological integrity is framed as central to qualitative research design in the JARS-Qual guidelines (Levitt et al., 2018), however the process of selecting suitable qualitative research designs has received limited attention within the literature on teaching qualitative research methods (Creswell et al., 2007). While Levitt et al. (2017) provide a range of considerations for achieving methodological integrity in research design, there is limited empirical understanding of how experienced qualitative researchers approach teaching students about qualitative research design. Wagner et al.’s (2019) systematic review findings suggest that students of qualitative research methods may learn qualitative approaches in procedural fashion, but lack skills and experience with how and when to implement these approaches to master the “craft” of undertaking qualitative research. Similarly, findings from Kalpokaite and Radivojevic’s (2020) descriptive qualitative case study exploring undergraduate psychology student’s experiences with learning computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software suggest “Qualitative research is most effectively learned by ‘getting your hands dirty’” and learning through experiential exercises (p. 1833). Arguably, experienced qualitative researchers navigate the task of designing and undertaking qualitative research informed by both explicit (i.e., formal) and tacit (i.e., cannot be or difficult to explicate; Collins, 2010) knowledge. The present study seeks to address this issue and respond to a need for empirically informed guidance on how to teach processes and concepts underpinning high quality qualitative research design.

Recently, scholars have called for research that explores the “broader teaching landscape” (Gibson and Sullivan, 2018, p. 10) from a multidisciplinary perspective which honours the roots that qualitative psychological research has in various disciplines (Levitt et
al., 2018). This is particularly important given the limited research conducted on teaching qualitative research methods (Wagner et al., 2019), not just within psychology. Hence, the present study draws on the experiences of qualitative researchers across health and business related disciplines to address the overarching research question: How do experienced qualitative researchers approach teaching students about qualitative research designs? Specifically, our objectives were to:

- Identify the epistemological underpinnings, methodologies, methods, data analysis approaches, and quality strategies experienced researchers believed to be important inclusions in qualitative research methods curricula
- Explore experienced qualitative researchers’ perspectives on the challenges typically faced by students of qualitative research methods
- Explore key pedagogical tools and processes drawn upon by experienced qualitative researchers in research methods education.

**Method**

**Design**

The research reported on in this paper is part of a larger project that developed an iOS mobile application (app), QualHand [(website blinded for review)] to support students’ qualitative design decision making. As part of this project, interviews were conducted with experienced qualitative researchers to explore their tacit knowledge about designing qualitative research. The second part of these interviews focused on teaching students about qualitative research design. It is the thematic analysis of the transcriptions of the latter part of the interviews that are presented in this manuscript. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected as both method and analytic tool for the interview component of this project given the
methodological congruence of this approach with the constructivist-interpretivist epistemological orientation of this study (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

**Researcher Description**

The research team includes four members experienced in qualitative psychological research (EC, LR, PA and SM), three (EC, LR, PA) of whom also teach qualitative research methods and/or supervise qualitative research projects in psychology. Their research and teaching experience directly informed the research question for this study. Although the four research team members all engage in qualitative research, they draw on various epistemologies (EC social constructionism, LR, PA, and SM pragmatism) and approaches (EC interpretivist and inductive, LR, PA and SM as a component of mixed methods research).

**Participants**

The sample comprised twelve experienced qualitative researchers (10 women and two men) from five disciplines (psychology, nursing, business, public health and social work) from one large Australian university. Eight of the participants were academics (four professors, two associate professors and two junior level academics). The remaining four were PhD students who were conducting qualitative research for their PhD and who were currently or had previously been employed to conduct qualitative research. Half of the participants (five researchers and one PhD student) had taught qualitative research methods courses. Following ethics approval, initial participants were selected based on a search of the first author’s home university website for qualitative researchers and teachers. Further participants were obtained through snowballing. Participants had a wealth of experience across a wide range of qualitative approaches including participatory action research, phenomenology, Foucauldian discourse analysis, case studies, ethnography, causal layered
analysis, and thematic analysis. Participants were given a $20 voucher in recognition of their
time in participating in the research.

Researcher–participant relationship

As the research was conducted in the home university of most of the researchers, a
research assistant (SM) was employed to recruit participants and conduct interviews to
minimise the likelihood of collegial relationships between researchers and potential
participants impacting on decisions to participate in the research. Further, SM, LR and EC
engaged in ongoing reflexive discussion to manage their own subjectivities in the research
process.

Interview guide

A semi-structured interview guide was developed. The questions relating to teaching
students about qualitative research began by asking participants to share the key things they
would tell a student whom was new to qualitative research about designing qualitative
research. The next set of questions asked participants to describe the key qualitative
methodologies, methods of data collection, data analysis, and epistemological positions
students need to learn. This was followed by questions relating to student qualitative research
projects, focusing on what the participants felt students needed to know, the problems
students typically face, and problems in composing research proposals. SM posed unique
follow-up and prompting questions to each participant allowing for discovery of new
knowledge. The final question in the guide asked participants to outline any emerging
qualitative research trends that they felt were important for students to know.

Procedure

All interviews were conducted by SM. The interviews lasted between 30 and 79
minutes (mean duration approximately 61 minutes) and were conducted between February
and April of 2019. All interviews were conducted face to face at SM’s home university (nine located in the participant’s offices, and three in dedicated research interview rooms).

Data collection ceased after 12 interviews, when information power (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora, 2016) was deemed adequate on the basis of the narrow study aim, specificity of the sample and quality of the dialogue. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Steps in thematic analysis were undertaken iteratively using the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Three members of the research team (EC, LR and SM) read all transcripts to familiarise themselves with the data. The portion of the transcripts relating to teaching students was coded independently by LR (using NVivo v.12) and SM (manually). LR and SM developed themes (and subthemes where there were clearly demarked areas within a theme) from the codes, with EC, LR and SM reviewing themes and contributing to the defining and naming of themes and final thematic structure.

Analysis

Seven themes relating to teaching qualitative methods in class or in supervising student projects were developed. These themes are visually displayed in a thematic map (Figure 1). The overarching theme is to *present qualitative research as a legitimate approach to enquiry*. Experienced qualitative researchers advocated a need to *present qualitative research as a legitimate approach to enquiry*. When teaching classes of students, the recommended approach was *don’t try and teach everything at once*, and this applied to epistemological positions, methodologies and analysis. When working with students to design qualitative projects, the recommended approach was to *focus on aligning components of qualitative research designs*, and underlying this was the *need to understand the research context*, combined with a focus on *pragmatism over idealism* to develop feasible projects. Across modes of teaching, *encourage students to embrace the uncertainty* was recommended. Each of the themes is detailed below.
Superordinate theme: Present qualitative research as a legitimate approach to enquiry

The qualitative researchers interviewed were clear in their stance that qualitative research is a legitimate approach to enquiry and should be taught as such. They noted that quantitative research and the positivist paradigm have dominated, both in what is taught to students; “most of our students are heavily grounded in the positivistic approach. And then so they grapple and really struggle with anything that [falls outside of this]”; and more broadly:

I think also when society in general thinks of research, it would best be described as quantitative research. So when you're new to qualitative research it can be quite challenging to accept it as a legitimate method of data collection or as a legitimate research methodology (P10).

Underlying these perceptions is the “myth that it's not as good as quantitative methods” (P1). This participant went on to comment that improvements have been noted in these perceptions over time, but this is not always conveyed to students:

Rather than saying, “a lot of people still have issues with it” ... I don't want to be naïve and say that no one has issues with it, but just to say it's more accepted, I think would help the students to gravitate to it further, because then they'll see there's value in this, rather than, "academics question it, so why should I bother using it?"

Consistent with this, other participants pre-empted a need to actively respond to a perception of qualitative research as an inferior form of research. For example, one participant, when asked what they would tell a student new to qualitative research, stated “I suppose the first thing is I'd say, ‘I strongly advocate that qualitative research has got a place in scientific knowledge’” (P12). Another noted:

I don't feel one [paradigm] is the gold standard ... when I teach it to students, I do the whole Yin and Yang thing. I always put up that sign and I say to them, this is how I
see it. One cannot exist without the other. You use different aspects depending on what you are asking of the question (P3).

The underlying message from participants is that there is no need to be apologetic about practising or teaching qualitative research and it should be actively promoted as a valid choice for addressing research questions.

**Theme: Don’t try and teach everything at once**

Many of the qualitative researchers interviewed commented that students new to qualitative research could be overwhelmed by the variety of approaches to qualitative research, with comments such as “I think sometimes we give them too much, where they can't understand it” (P3). Qualitative researchers holding this view recommended a staggered approach to teaching, rather than presenting all the options initially. As this participant continued:

Because if you give them all of that upfront, just the nomenclature and the words and whatever is off-putting. So I feel to be able to capture them, you first have to give them something that makes some sense to them, then give them the extra bits.

It should be noted that not all participants supported the gradual introduction to epistemologies, methods and analysis. For example, one participant did not see a need to cover epistemology at all, commenting that:

I think that that's too in-depth. To be honest with you, I don't think that there's a need. But then again, I don't know your [the interviewer’s] discipline. ... yeah, even possibly at the master's level I don't think it's necessary. I think that's going too far (P5).

Taking the opposite approach, in relation to methods and methodologies, one participant noted that “I actually give them all” (P4), whether teaching a five day intensive course or a semester long course. They further explained “I don't think we can teach piecemeal. It [all] has to be taught”. While there were some differences in opinion, the majority of participants
supported the gradual introduction of approaches to support student learning. Three subthemes within this relate specifically to teaching about epistemology, methodology and analysis.

**Sub-theme: Introduce epistemological positions gradually**

Reflecting the broader theme, the qualitative researchers noted the potential for confusion in covering epistemological positions: "there is the potential I think with anything that, because there are quite a number of epistemologies and positions, for it to become quite overwhelming" (P11). An understanding of epistemology was viewed as important, given students’ limited exposure to this in prior teaching:

The first and foremost they have to learn about is ontology and epistemology. That's where we start off, right from the get-go. It's difficult for them to get their heads around it, because they're usually positivists, but they don't know they are when they start off. So, we've got to really explore their perceptions of knowledge and reality. That's the very first thing to get their heads around, otherwise they'll end up doing research that belongs to no particular paradigm (P6).

One participant recommended approaching discussion of epistemology by first distinguishing between quantitative and qualitative paradigms, and then discussing key approaches within the qualitative paradigm:

I personally think they need the two major paradigms, and the understanding of those things. Then you drill down into interpretive and descriptive, and then when you discuss each of those things that come under them, then I think the epistemological origins should come in (P3).

Another participant described the ‘essentials’ as:

Certainly positivism, social constructivism, phenomenology, and some interpretivism. That's the top three (sic) to get their heads around first. But they need to know it. Even
if it's just the basics, for an undergrad programme, they need to know it. For an HDR [higher degree by research] student, they absolutely have to know it, because I need to see it in their thesis (P6).

**Sub-theme: Focus on one key methodology before providing the broad scope of possible methodologies**

Similarly, many participants were in favour of teaching one or a limited number of methodologies to start with. For example, one participant stated “So I guess like anything, you want to equip them with an understanding of the more complicated stuff, but you want to start off with the basics” (P2). The choice of which methodology to start with varied by discipline and the types or qualitative research that were privileged within that discipline. For example, within psychology, thematic analysis was a popular choice; “I think it's good to start off with thematic analysis. It's not as complicated as some other ones” (P2); thematic analysis was conceptualised as both methodology and analysis:

> “This [thematic analysis] is a good starting point”, because the skills you learn can be transferable to other qualitative methodologies, while the terminology might be different, while the intent behind the skill may differ, which of course it does, you've still got that skill that you can use so, it's not totally scary… (P11)

**Sub-theme: Teach an entry level analysis with a focus on coding first**

The time taken to master one analytic approach limited the feasibility of teaching multiple approaches. As one participant noted:

> There's always a competing demand for what you can get into curriculum. So I'm very conscious that we can't have everything in there. So, I think, the most common approaches in data analysis, which they're going to come across in written [journal] articles (P12).
Again, preferences for which analyses should be taught were discipline specific and substantively relevant, “So I think it's got to be subject specific, the common subject specific ones for that area. Because that then prepares them for reading the literature they're going to read in that area.” Coding was viewed as a core skill: “…coding is really important. It's tedious but it's really important because if anybody is serious about their qualitative research they are going to be asked about their coding strategy” (P5), and in psychology thematic analysis was viewed as “a bit of a building block” (P8) that could be used to develop transferable skills.

**Theme: Teaching interview and focus group skills are mandatory, but remain open to new and emerging forms of data collection**

Interviewing was regarded as the core data collection method to teach students to build their understanding of qualitative research. Teaching materials covered types of interviews, potential problems, and ethical considerations in interviewing. For example, one participant described the content they cover with their students:

> Within the interviews, I'll do the different derivations of that, the telephone, Skype, the face to face, and so on. And then, actually, in that, we spend some time talking about interviewing different kinds of participants, and issues to do with, for example, elite participants. If you're interviewing participants who are subject specialists. Interviewing the reluctant participant. Interviewing the angry, or the happy. And just be aware of that. And then, I'll do something on ethical interviewing, and social responsibility (P6).

Teaching interviewing skills was closely followed by teaching focus groups, again focusing on both understanding; “and I would expect focus groups, and an understanding of the techniques that you might use within a focus group to foster engagement and group effect” (P10); and practice:
It would be awesome if students could get a sense of what it's like to conduct a focus group, or a workshop. So some of those sorts of skills. Like how to wrangle a crowd. Contemplating dominant voices, opinions, conflict, opportunity to speak. And the associated activities that you can do to get people thinking about stuff (P8).

Also deemed important was teaching observation as a data collection method:

But I do think that also an understanding of if they were to do observations, then the role of them as an observer and the potential impact upon what has been observed. And then the techniques to try and minimise that. And then also how do you go about doing good field notes? How do you go about collecting good observations? And how do you make sure that you're getting the breadth and the depth, and the different timeframes and so on? (P10).

Participants were open to the use of new forms of data collection, with one arguing that “anything that is text based or can be turned into text is qualitative, or can be qualitative” (P2), and another encouraging consideration of non-textual data:

So with media it could be print, or text media. But also like photos, or film, or other ...

And not just in a quantifiable sense, but also in thinking about the symbolism or the metaphor that might be attached with visual representation (P8).

Technology was seen as providing new avenues for both collecting data; “So we've got the internet to be able to talk, so you can do Skype calls and see people, so you're still getting a full non-verbal experience without having to travel” (P9); and as a source of data: “I think it would be really good to look at Reddit discussion boards and Twitter or Facebook, using text as your data. And there's so much cool stuff you can do with Google Analytics and existing data that's just available on the internet. Taking that and using it can be a really rich source of data” (P1). While interviews, focus groups and observation continue to dominate, these
findings highlight the need to exercise agility in teaching, remaining open to new and emerging sources of data.

**Theme: Focus on aligning components of qualitative research designs**

When supporting students to design research projects, participants noted the need for alignment of components. As one participant succinctly stated: “Epistemology influences theory, theory influences methodology, methodology influences method, so really using those (sic) four elements of research, I'd say is really useful” (P11). Inconsistencies and omissions in research proposals were viewed indicative of problematic research design:

> Because you have to think about the very start all the way through, so I suppose it's the research question, the objectives didn't really, weren't congruent then that's a big question mark. And then if the methodology wasn't congruent that would be another big question mark. Then if you go through and the gap isn't evident, or there's a very weak literature search to support it and they haven't justified that and there's a gap there. And then if the ethical approaches were of concern. Or the data storage, the security of the data was of concern, those would be big red flags for me (P12).

Inconsistencies in research designs within proposals were often attributed to either a lack of clarity in the research question as;

> ... They [students] make the biggest mistake because they don't clarify it [the research question]. If you can't clarify it then you don't know what you're doing. So that has to be the first thing. Because that will then determine the research design that you select, and then link methodologies to that research design, that's key (P3)

Or insufficient operationalisation: "complete lack of understanding about how they're going to research it. 'Oh, I'm just going to go and do some interviews’. That's the lack of design, it's lack of thought" (P9).

**Sub-theme: Tailor quality strategies to the project**
The focus on aligning components of qualitative research designs extended to ensuring that quality strategies were tailored to projects. Participants explained that students needed a broad understanding of quality principles and quality strategies; "So knowing those things (credibility, dependability, confirmability, et cetera), what they mean, and what mechanisms can you use when designing your study, so what aspects of design can you introduce to demonstrate quality? So that's important" (P3). Key quality strategies referred to by many of the participants were reflexivity, member-checking, audit trails, working collegially and triangulation. However, the need to select only relevant quality strategies for a project was highlighted: "things have to be tailored to whatever you're doing" (P1). Participants noted the tendency for students to attempt to include a wide range of quality strategies, without tailoring them to the project:

The other thing is knowing what to use when because what students tend to do is they want to tick every single box of trustworthiness and try and put in 50 million things that will show you trustworthiness. And they're not practical. So it's about, in a practical sense, what are the few things that you can do working with your budget, working with your participants, that will ensure them? (P3).

This same participant provided an example of how text-book knowledge may not translate to real-world research:

If you look at things like member check, if you've got an itinerant population or transient population that you're not going to find again, and you're collecting data from them, putting in a member check, while it might be textbook perfect, is not actually appropriate to your study design.

In summary, participants acknowledged the importance of ensuring students understood quality criteria and the range of quality strategies available, but recommended they be embedded judiciously in research projects.
**Theme: Need to Understand the Research Context**

While the aligning of components of qualitative research designs was important, participants stressed the need for this to occur within an understanding of the specific research context. As one participant noted:

I think that there's no one way to do qualitative research, even if you're using the same methods as someone else, because it needs to fit with and be relevant to that particular context, which is different and changing all the time (P7).

This participant further commented that:

…if you don't actually have a really good understanding of the politics and at a theoretical level, and then all the way down to a grass roots level, then you're going to be going out into the community or going to community organisations or approaching groups or individuals, and what you think or know, or whatever, is going to be completely incongruent with actually what's being experienced.

Failure to understand the research context could result in students electing to use inappropriate methods of data collection:

…they don't put enough time thinking about “what is it I'm really wanting to investigate here?” And so that connection between the research question and the methods that have been used, so I get people using focus groups and I'm going, "why the hell do you use focus groups?" You're actually not wanting focus groups here. You're really wanting individual data and you're not allowing for any group effect. Or it's culturally inappropriate to be doing that with this particular group, because the only voice you're going to get is that dominant individual (P10).

In evaluating students’ research proposals, understanding of context was evaluated through a focus on:
Population, setting, sampling ... Will it give you the data you're looking for? The way the data is collected, is there any threat from that approach to participants participating, participants seeing the study through? Those are the kinds of things that I would look at (P3).

Participants shared a focus on ensuring that students had sufficient understanding of the research context to make suitable design choices.

**Theme: Pragmatism over Idealism**

The qualitative researchers explained that students typically approach qualitative research with ambitious ideas about what they want to do:

…especially when they start an HDR journey, they're keen, they're going to change the whole world and fix the whole world. And when they get really annoyed with you when you say to them, "Yes, yes. But…", and like you try to pull it back a little bit, they fight you tooth and nail on that (P3).

Participants noted that students often had unrealistic ideas of what could be achieved in qualitative research within the limited time and resources available: “they've got no budget but they've got this 10 year longitudinal study and you think, this just isn't realistic” (P12). Supervisors were viewed as playing a key role in guiding research design to ensure realistic projects:

That's where you need a lot of guidance for someone to say, great idea, but you'll still be here in 10 years, and it's going to cost $100,000. You're not doing that. Here is a way you could still maybe answer a lot of that but in a way that you'll be done in three and a half years, or whatever (P2).

Similarly, one participant commented:

There's no point coming out with the world's greatest research question if you can't quite research it. And I think that's the other thing that I try and get Ph.D. students to
think about is, what question are you trying to answer? Then, how are you going to answer it? Is it even answerable? And then, can you, in the time you've got, and the resources you've got, answer it? (P9).

This same participant recommended taking a project management approach to ensure pragmatic concerns were addressed:

That's what I'd get a research student to do is, is map it out. It's a project, and if you're doing a project, what is your path, what is your duration, where's your contingency, where are the critical points? Thinking about all of these things. And if you don't get your data here, what are you going to do about it? What's your water wings? You know, you don't throw a baby into a swimming pool - stick some water wings on them [first]!. What are your protections? Could you go in this direction if that doesn't come up, or this direction? So it's trying to think about project planning, and sort of all of the contingencies that might hit you.

Adopting a pragmatic approach, supervisors are able to guide students in their research design to develop feasible projects.

**Theme: Encourage students to embrace the uncertainty**

Qualitative research was recognised as complex and demanding, with participants noting the need for students to be able to cope with uncertainty: “it is a very messy and unpredictable thing, qualitative research. That's just, I guess, what it is. So being comfortable in that, having some comfort in that real not knowing” (P7). In terms of the research process, periods of particularly high uncertainty coincided with selecting a topic and research question:

Sometimes a sense of being overwhelmed. And I think that comes from trying to like ... Having a substantive interest in something, and then trying to locate, inverted commas, the gap in the literature for that inquiry. I think that's a sticking point (P8)
And conducting the analysis:

The biggest difficulty is getting them to recognise in their minds how to make sense of that data and how to organise that data, not only in their minds, but to be able to talk about it and then to be able to write it down (P5).

Uncertainty pervaded conducting qualitative research and the processes of learning qualitative research in the classroom. As one participant commented:

[Psychology] students come in with a lot of quantitative knowledge, and they view the way that it [qualitative methods] can be taught as, “I have to throw everything that I know out the window, and use this new approach”. So for me, I've always said very broadly, “Embrace the uncertainty, embrace the ambiguity”, because, I think that qualitative research can induce a few of those feelings of uncertainty, but, you learn how to navigate; that's the fun of what you're doing, there's so many choices and ways of doing things (P11).

Qualitative researchers reported encouraging students to persevere through periods of uncertainty: "it's all about engagement with the process, not giving up when things get really hard” (P11) and "Number one thing is, be patient with yourself, because it can sometimes be a very counterintuitive way of collecting and analysing data" (P5). Encouraging students to embrace and remain open to uncertainty optimises the conditions for student learning.

**Discussion**

In this paper, we set out to explore how experienced qualitative researchers approach teaching students about qualitative research designs. Guided by specific objectives, our analysis generated a set of themes nested within the superordinate theme ‘present qualitative research as a legitimate approach to enquiry’ which highlights the ongoing implications of the hegemonic quantitative culture that pervades psychological research. For example, it is telling that in the process of describing the pragmatic considerations involved with teaching
qualitative research, all participants in this study sought to contextualise these with the broader cultural tensions associated with qualitative research approaches in psychology. Commentary and critique of the limiting nature of this quantitative culture is rife throughout the academic literature (e.g., Tafreshi, Slaney, and Neufeld, 2016), and we do not seek to replicate these critiques here. Some scholars (e.g., McMullen and Winston-Proctor, 2018), despite recognising this cultural context, have emphasised the need to just start teaching qualitative methods. We argue, however, that to emphasise getting on with it (i.e., qualitative research education) at the expense of working to understand this cultural context neglects and erases the impact of the structural marginalisation of qualitative methods that shapes one’s ability to engage at a pragmatic level. Further, this approach neglects to map out how the quantitative culture differentially affords some academics opportunities to simply ignore these broader cultural forces. For example, qualitative research is often constructed as feminine (Riley et al., 2019), as such, the practice and its proponents may be devalued on the within a broader patriarchal academic culture. Further, failing to challenge the status quo in qualitative research methods education perpetuates the privileging a particular epistemological standpoint (i.e., scholarly works embodying Eurocentric perspectives; Bulhan, 2015) and undermines an ever-growing movement which advocates the self-evidentiary value of decolonizing psychology education (Dudgeon and Walker, 2015).

In consideration of this overarching theme from our analysis, we venture that teaching and learning qualitative inquiry can be an overtly subversive act in contexts where structural elements mean that qualitative research is not on an equal footing; ‘getting on with it’ may not agitate for nor deliver changes to these marginalising structural elements. For example, qualitative research is rooted in critical social psychology and associated postmodern and social constructionist epistemologies (Shaw et al., 2019) and some have suggested that an increasing acceptance of qualitative methods is simply an increasing acceptance of qualitative
methods that draw on post-positivist paradigms, while methods embedded in other paradigms continue to be marginalised (Riley et al., 2019). While there is certainly space for all forms of research enquiry, neglecting these critical social-justice origins while celebrating the growing popularity of qualitative methods grounded in a sub-set of epistemologies does not reflect an authentic and enduring appreciation of the plurality of qualitative psychological research (Shaw et al., 2019). Nor does it value all forms of qualitative psychological research alongside the full range of approaches to psychological research enquiry. As such, we call for an appreciation for the need to hold the value of multiple imperatives in mind at one time.

**Balancing the pragmatics of pedagogy while remaining vigilant to structural challenges**

There is value in articulating, implementing, and evaluating robust pedagogical practice in qualitative research while at the same time remaining critical and vigilant to the broader cultural and structural elements that shape these practices. For example, it is the case that qualitative methods in psychology are taught by a small group of specialist academics (Gibson and Sullivan, 2018) and problematically as a relatively small feature of courses with a primarily hypothetico-deductive orientation (McMullen, 2018). Within this quantitative cultural context, qualitative research is constructed as an ‘alternate’ to quantitative research; by extension, quantitative research is framed to students as ontologically superior to qualitative research (Roberts and Castell, 2016). This curriculum structure emphasises what Jackson (2015) terms a ‘separatist notion’ and leads into the false framing of qualitative and quantitative methods as wholly incommensurable (McMullen, 2018).

Some have advocated the teaching of a multitude of research paradigms (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods; Jackson, 2015) to students integrated within more general research methods topics (e.g., Fielden, Goldie and Silrence, 2012; Gibson and Sullivan, 2018). Others have critiqued this model, giving consideration to the merits and disadvantages of teaching qualitative research in a standalone course (McMullen, 2018). For example,
standalone course can highlight the importance of qualitative methods to student cohorts and accurately reflect the diversity of psychological research practice (McMullen, 2018). At the same time, McMullen (2018) suggests that a standalone course can falsely homogenise qualitative approaches, and further entrenching the methods-driven focus of psychology, decontextualizing research design from necessary theoretical and substantive considerations. Despite McMullen’s (2018) critique of the standalone model, she ultimately argues the value of a standalone course as an important strategy to support students’ learning in qualitative research as a “…second language in the context of the dominant language of objectivism, post-positivism, and hypothetico-deductivism in the discipline of psychology” (p. 237).

Given the well-formulated and reasoned arguments that have been levelled by various scholars in support of a standalone or integrated approach to qualitative research education (Wagner, et al., 2019), we would be ill-advised to claim that one approach is clearly superior to the other. Each has its merits and benefits. What we do know, however, is that navigating curriculum design with these considerations in mind is a distinct challenge in research methods pedagogy. For example, documented in our theme ‘Present qualitative research as a legitimate form of enquiry’ participants spoke explicitly to the challenges inherent to contextualising qualitative research methods when educating students, and the risks involved with heralding any one particular approach to research as superior to another. These risks are evident in the recent so-called replicability crisis (Maxwell, Lau, and Howard, 2015) facing quantitative research, a crisis that some claim has undermined public trust and confidence in the findings of quantitative psychological research (Wingen, Berkessel, and Englich, 2019).

Participants in our study grappled with how to educate students on the history and context of qualitative research without placing unnecessary focus on the alterity of qualitative methods. For example, participants outlined the challenge in educating students on the differences between various paradigms of research without unintentionally organising them into a
hierarchy. Approaching pedagogy of psychological research in this way socialises students to epistemological flexibility, criticality, and opens them up to various ways of thinking, being, and doing. By extension, educating from this standpoint positions students to broaden their available career options, and to design research with the methodological integrity (Gibson and Sullivan, 2018) to address the various research questions we hope they will pose in their future careers.

**Introduce qualitative research in bite-sized chunks**

Our findings highlight the value in introducing the elements of qualitative research (epistemology, methodology, methods, analyses, and so on) to students gradually. In the theme ‘Don’t try and teach everything at once’ participants observed that students may feel overwhelmed when learning about qualitative research, particularly if they are learning about it for the first time, and in contexts where they have been socialised to know research as a purely hypothetico-deductive practice. One approach to support students’ learning is to scaffold the introduction of qualitative research at various levels of their undergraduate and postgraduate programs (McMullen, 2018; Roberts and Castell, 2016). For example, offering introductory level courses in the early years of an undergraduate degree, and introducing increasingly complex content through the duration of the program. Participants in our study adopted this scaffolded approach even within their teaching practices. For example, grounding students with foundational analyses (e.g., thematic analysis) initially, and later using the transferable skills learned in this analysis to build capacity for more complex analyses (e.g., grounded theory, interpretive phenomenological analysis). Others have endorsed this approach, for example, Fielden et al. (2012) noted the difficulties psychology students experience in learning grounded theory as their first approach, and their intention to replace this with thematic analysis in the future, with this viewed as a starting methodology that develops skills transferable to other methodologies at a later date. Similarly, experienced
qualitative researchers in our study explained that they tend to focus on first introducing key
data collection methods, such as interviewing and focus groups, before expanding to other
forms of data collection. In this, however, there was a tension evident across themes, where
participants noted the need to balance focusing on these foundational methods of data
collection, while also exercising agility, and being open to new and emerging forms of data
collection.

Extending on these ideas evident in our thematic content ‘Don’t try and teach
everything at once’, we believe it is important to acknowledge the pragmatic parameters
shaping qualitative pedagogical practice. For example, McMullen (2018) troubles the
assumption that an academic or student can develop competencies in multiple methodologies.
Rather, academics and students are likely to become proficient in select methodologies,
perhaps because they resonate personally, or are a good fit for the context. We advocate a
balanced approach that encourages students to take the learnings gained from the often
limited instruction qualitative researchers can provide as a function of their own experiences,
and invites students to build on these through curating their own further learning
opportunities. Key to this invitation is bringing to students’ awareness the notion that
qualitative research is not homogenous in practice, theory, or paradigm.

Methodological integrity, idealism, and pragmatism

Methodological integrity in research design was a key and organising concept for
experienced qualitative researchers’ approaches to teaching practice, outlined in the theme
‘Focus on aligning components of qualitative research design’. The emphasis placed on
methodological integrity by participants echoes the centrality of this principle to the
conceptualisation of high quality research within the JARS-Qual guidelines (Levitt et al.,
2018). Experienced qualitative researchers in this study explained how all features of design
(including quality strategies) needed to align to enhance the quality of a project. In
connection with this, participants emphasised that designing for methodological integrity often meant privileging a pragmatic approach over an idealistic approach. For the experienced qualitative researchers, this meant educating students on the importance of contextualising the research problem or question. Similarly, Fox and Nic Giolla Easpaig (2021) reflect on their role in supporting undergraduate psychology students to independently select research questions and designs while ensuring these are also conceptually meaningful and feasible. A balance must be struck between potentially competing intentions: to design the ideal project, or, to design a project that is practically feasible and appropriate to the research question and context. Fox and Nic Giolla Easpaig (2021) reflect that discussions with students whom desire to undertake research exploring the experiences of First Nations peoples in Australia offer opportunities to nuance students’ understandings of the need for research to be respectful, responsive to context and shared experiences of coloniality. We see the tension inherent to balancing pragmatism and idealism in research design reflected in the JARS-Qual guidelines emphasis on methodological integrity underpinned by fidelity and utility (Levitt, et al., 2018, p. 33). Qualitative research pedagogy necessarily involves modelling these tension points to students. In order to execute this modelling, educators must draw on both methodological proficiency and substantive knowledge to appropriately contextualise research design. These tensions are a key feature of findings of a systematic review of research literature pertaining to qualitative research methods education (Wagner et al., 2019), that students require guided instruction and input from their educators in an apprentice-style model to develop capabilities in balancing the pragmatic with the ideal.

Arguably, to balance these imperatives, experienced qualitative researchers draw on both explicit (i.e., formal) and tacit (i.e., cannot be or difficult to explicate; Collins, 2015) knowledge. It is the latter component perhaps that contributes to an air of mysticism around how methodological integrity is achieved. Arguably, this mysticism can be countered by
embracing the *ethic of transparency* outlined in the JARS-Qual guidelines (Levitt et al., 2018). For example, encouragingly, a recent analysis of qualitative articles in the field of sport psychology published within the last 30 years suggested that the practice of researchers reporting their philosophical positions has increased over time (Poucher et al., 2019). Given the findings from our study (i.e., the importance of introducing qualitative research to students in ‘bite sized chunks’) and the emphasis on transparency in quality research design (Levitt et al., 2018), we see value in developing flexible tools for students that provide transparency to the process of achieving methodological integrity.

To this end, the findings from this research have been used to inform the development of an iOS mobile application (app), QualHand, to guide students in the process of selecting qualitative designs, with a focus on the alignment of components. Specifically, our research findings identified the qualitative research approaches included in the app, prompted the inclusion of pages on quality and epistemology, and informed the flexible functionality of the app to match with students learning progress. The app steps students through a number of decision points, at each point providing further information. When QualHand is first launched, the user is presented with the first of a series of questions: ‘What do you want to do?’ The user can then select one of the displayed options: ‘Build theory’, ‘Explore lived experience’, ‘Develop themes to describe patterns within qualitative data’, ‘Describe the social consequences of text or speech’, and ‘Systematically describe and categorise qualitative data’. Based on the option that the user selects, they are presented with another question and a different set of options. This process continues until the application narrows down the search to a specific qualitative approach. For example, if a user selects ‘build theory’, they are directed to a general information page about Grounded Theory and are provided information on and can select from three specific approaches to Grounded Theory based on which approach best suits their needs. The final page describes the qualitative
approach (for example, Systematic Grounded Theory) and provides detailed instructions and resources to employ it. Increasing the functionality of the app, users can navigate back and forwards between steps, access definitions of key terms, make notes and download or email a summary of their decisions and notes at any stage in the design process. QualHand is available free of charge in the iOS App Store, joining its cousin, StatHand (see [reference blinded for review]), in helping students negotiate complex decisions inherent in planning and executing coherent research in psychology.

**Embedding structure, maintaining flexibility, embracing uncertainty**

While an application (such as QualHand) may provide students an accessible platform to hone their skills in making appropriate selections in research design, the utility of any pedagogical tool rests on how it is used and framed to students. We recognise an inherent irony in any attempt to mechanise the process of designing for methodological integrity, a process that must be flexible, and is arguably equal parts idealism and pragmatism. Attempting to design and embed pedagogical tools to elucidate the intangible and tangible processes of qualitative research design brings an inherent tension: how do we provide some structure that is accessible and useful to students but maintain the flexibility of qualitative research design? We venture that this question and tension is not a problem to be solved, rather, is a paradox to navigate. Qualitative research is an inherently contextual practice (Riley et al., 2019). It is this understanding that has prompted the JARS-Qual guidelines (Levitt et al., 2018): a flexible set of standards for evaluating qualitative research that is responsive to context. Flexibility, responsiveness to context and, by extension, sweeping uncertainties, termed the “…‘no right or wrong’ dilemma…” (Sargeant, 2012, p. 43), are authentic features of qualitative research practice. Modelling the navigation of these tensions to students requires educators to embrace the uncertainty that we seek to invite in our
students. It follows that there is no singular panacea to solve the tensions associated with qualitative research methods education.

**Strengths and limitations**

The findings presented here need to be evaluated in terms of the strengths and limitations of the design and sample. Strengths of the research are the use of exploratory interviews with qualitative researchers from a range of disciplines and at all levels from experienced PhD students through to professors. This multidisciplinary diversity aligns with Gibson and Sullivan’s (2018) call for research from a broader base. As active qualitative researchers, teachers and supervisors, our participants’ reflections provide ecologically relevant findings of direct relevance to teaching practice. However, despite this, there are limitations to the transferability of the findings to other contexts. All participants were from one university, and while their qualitative experiences varied widely, it is possible that the university culture, policy, and procedures shaped both their qualitative research and teaching practices. More broadly, this research is situated within the Australian context, which currently does not have the inclusion of qualitative research in undergraduate or postgraduate psychology education mandated. Whilst this mirrors the situation in the US and Canada, this is a point of distinction from other contexts (such as the UK) which may limit the transferability of our findings.

**Concluding remarks and future directions**

Our findings present the teaching of qualitative methods as a site of multiple tensions, both in terms of context (cultural tensions associated with qualitative research approaches in psychology) and practice (tensions between pragmatism and idealism, and between providing structure and enabling flexibility). Qualitative research teachers and supervisors navigate these tensions daily to provide students with the best possible learning experiences. To support this negotiation, we advocate for further research that explores the challenges and opportunities in qualitative research pedagogy in specific and situated contexts, for example,
in particular localities, within particular institutional structures, and within particular substantive domains. Contextualising qualitative research pedagogy in this way connects educators to salient structural and cultural elements shaping their own teaching practices. By extension, this knowledge presents an opportunity to understand the pedagogical implications of the contexts they teach within, and to make decisions about the pedagogical strategies they adopt, embed, and evaluate. We call for further research to build a profile of evidence-based pedagogical practice, while also acknowledging the fluidity needed to embrace changing epistemologies, methodologies, methods and data sources.

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Figure 1. Thematic map depicting the relationship between themes associated with teaching qualitative research design in-class and supervising student projects.