Research Article

Different Paradigm Conceptions and Their Implications for Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Paradigms have been often presented as fundamental to how we should conceive of and conduct qualitative research. Some writers even hold that defining a researcher's own paradigm, i.e., including defining their own ontology and epistemology, should be the starting point for conducting any qualitative project. Yet there appears to be little recognition of the uniqueness of the researcher-defined paradigm model often promoted within qualitative research or the existence of alternative paradigm conceptions. Based on an analysis of the original texts, I compare the researcher-defined paradigms proposed by Guba and Lincoln with paradigm conceptions proposed by Kuhn (1970) and Burrell and Morgan (1979), highlighting fundamental differences in their rationale, definition, who or what has a paradigm, how they arise, the positions that researchers can adopt, the scope of their ontological claims, their relation to specific research projects, examples of paradigm positions, and their tenets. The analysis shows that while the three sets of authors all refer to their constructions as paradigms, they present distinct, unrelated paradigm models. Recognizing the potential of distinct paradigm conceptions opens a space for qualitative researchers to reexamine their own commitments. Given the potential alternatives, qualitative researchers who continue to appeal to researcher-defined paradigms at the very least should be able to justify both their choice of paradigm conception and the position they have chosen within it. That there are viable alternatives should allow qualitative researchers to reconsider whether the researcher-defined paradigm model remains the best approach for presenting their assumptions related to a project.

Keywords

paradigms, Kuhn, assumptions, research methodology

Introduction

Paradigms are fundamental to some characterizations of qualitative research, helping to define both what qualitative research is and how it should be conducted (Blaikie & Priest, 2017; Creswell, 2013; Denzin and Lincoln, 2017; Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Egon, 1985; Lincoln et al., 2024). There have been longstanding debates within the qualitative research community about which paradigm position to adopt (Guba, 1978, 1990) and whether paradigms continue to play a useful role within qualitative and mixed methods research (Donmoyer, 2006; Johnson, 2011; Maxwell, 2011). We have been through "paradigm wars" (Anderson and Herr, 1998; Gage, 1989; Given, 2017), calls for "paradigm dialogue" (Denzin, 2009), and concerns about the proliferation of paradigm positions (Donmoyer, 2008). While debate about the role of paradigms within the qualitative research community appears to have gone quiet of late, appeals to paradigms continue to be regularly made by qualitative researchers (Alcala et al., 2022; Hu, 2022; Zinatsa & Saurombe, 2022) and have even moved online (Adu, 2021; Barrow, 2019).

Almost all this discussion in the qualitative research literature assumes a single paradigm conception, a conception I have referred to as the researcher-defined paradigm model (Chafe, 2023). This conception was originally proposed by Guba and Lincoln (Guba, 1978, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). While there are several variants (Donmoyer, 2008; Guba et al., 2017; Heron & Reason, 1997), core to the

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researcher-defined paradigm model is the idea that a researcher needs to first define their own ontology, which informs their selection of an epistemology, which informs the methodological choices for a study. In order to reconsider the basis of this model, in this article I first offer a definition of what a paradigm conception is and propose some terminology for discussing their features. I then compare Guba and Lincoln's researcher-defined conception with two alternative paradigm conceptions: Kuhn (1970) and Burrell and Morgan (1979). These authors all refer to their conceptions as paradigms. To help avoid confusion I will refer to their positions using the following descriptors: discipline paradigms (Kuhn) and positional paradigm (Burrell and Morgan). The basis for these descriptors will be clear after the discussion of each conception below. A comparison of these alternatives will highlight the unique features of the researcher-defined conception. While they all discuss assumptions that underlie some type of inquiry, there are profound differences in the type of assumptions these authors discuss and in what they aim to achieve with their different paradigms. These three examples are not the only conceptions of paradigms that have been proposed, even within the qualitative research tradition (Ford, 1975; Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Patton, 1980), but these models illustrate the possibility for various paradigm conceptions and the scope of difference between them. I conclude by discussing the implications alternative paradigm conceptions have for current qualitative researchers. Although it is based on an analysis of older works, the article is not just a historical account of other paths we could have taken. It also aims to defamiliarize the conception of a paradigm used within qualitative research. Highlighting a variety of paradigm conceptions hopefully opens a space for current qualitative researchers to reexamine their own commitments.

Approach

This article arose from a program of research examining different models of qualitative inquiry. In reviewing earlier qualitative texts, I identified that Guba says his paradigms arose from the work of several sources (e.g., Ford, 1975; Hesse, 1980; Schwartz & Ogilvy, 1979), but also from the work of Kuhn (Guba, 1978; Guba & Lincoln, 1985). This claim is repeated by later qualitative researchers (e.g., Thorne, 2016: 44). But in reviewing Guba's early work, I realized that he does not provide any substantive analysis of Kuhn's position. In fact, he barely even directly references it. In reviewing Kuhn's work (1970), it became apparent that the authors clearly provide very distinct conceptions of what a paradigm is. During this review, I also identified other paradigm conceptions authors proposed in relation to academic inquiry (Patton, 1975; 1980; Ford, 1975) and that some authors can be seen as presenting multiple distinct paradigm models (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

The term paradigmata dates back to Plato, in whose work it refers to an exemplary example of something (Ambuel, 2007; Merton, 2004; Weiss, 2012). Its reintroduction into modern academic discussions comes from at least three sources. In his 1930s lectures, Wittgenstein uses paradigm to refer to the reference examples (or "yardsticks") which he sees as being required for shared language games (Luckhardt, 1978; Wittgenstein, 1972). In this way, Wittgenstein uses the term in a way similar to Plato. Paradigms have been used independently in linguistics to describe certain structures of language (Fossali et al., 2017; Saussure, 2006). The idea of a paradigm relating to the underlying assumptions of a position or theory was first raised by Merton (1973, 1996, 2004) in the 1940s. Merton's paradigms are schema used for presenting the underlying assumptions, concepts, and remaining questions related to a theory or position. In particular, Merton saw value in detailing the conceptual assumptions inherent in qualitative descriptions, but he also developed paradigms for entire disciplines, e.g., sociology (Merton, 1973; Merton, 2004: 268). Later authors introduce talk of paradigms as being the worldview of either an individual person or culture (Ford, 1975; Schwartz & Ogilvy, 1979). For example, Schwartz and Ogilvy (1979: 3) see a paradigm as being "the abstract level" between or the lens through which an individual sees the actual world.

For the analysis presented below, I focused on three *paradigm conceptions*, which I define as paradigm models that identify various positions that can be adopted within them. I chose Kuhn and Guba and Lincoln's conceptions because of their importance to qualitative research and the presumed connection between them. Burrell and Morgan's conception was developed around the same time as Guba and Lincoln's conception and highlights another alternative with a similar structure. As these authors all present various formulations of their paradigms, I focused this analysis on what I took to be their earliest definitive formulation: Kuhn (1970), Burrell and Morgan (1979), and Guba and Lincoln (1994).

Paradigm conceptions are complex and they have many features in terms of which they can be compared. Based on what seemed to be the most significant differences between the three conceptions, I selected nine features to focus on: the rationale for developing their paradigm model, i.e., what is the model meant to do; how are different paradigm positions defined; who or what has a paradigm; what is the origin of different paradigm positions, i.e., how do they arise or get adopted; what is the scope of their ontological claims; their proposed connection to research projects; what is the range of paradigm positions that could be adopted within a conception; and the types of assumptions or tenets that can be included in a paradigm position. Other points of comparison could also have been examined, but these features are sufficient to illustrate the distinctness of the various conceptions.

The Structure of a Paradigm Conception

To better understand different paradigm conceptions, it is useful to first recognize the different levels at which they can be discussed (Table 1). Paradigms specifying separate

positions have three distinct levels. The highest level is the conception of a paradigm itself, which is the broad concept of a paradigm that an author presents. For example, as we will see, Kuhn and Guba and Lincoln offer unique conceptions of what is a paradigm. It may be useful to think of a conception of a paradigm then as setting up its own system or game. A vital step for better understanding paradigms is being clear about which conception is being discussed, i.e., which game are you in.

The second level concerns the different positions that can be taken up under a conception of a paradigm. For example, Guba & Lincoln, 1994 conception describes four paradigm positions that can be taken up: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism. This is the level at which paradigm positions get adopted by different researchers. While Guba and Lincoln present a conception of a paradigm, they do not attempt to differentiate researchers at the level of their general conception. Rather they see researchers as being differentiated by whether they are a positivist, constructivist, etc., i.e., by the paradigm position they hold. Authors have produced a long list of the types of items and assumptions that they have included in their paradigm positions, e.g., philosophical suppositions, theories, artifacts, etc. I propose the general term "tenets" to refer to the beliefs, positions, assumptions, or any other items that can make up a paradigm position. Paradigm positions are made up of multiple tenets. On the lowest of the three structural levels of a paradigm conception, discussions could be about a specific tenet of a paradigm position, again recognizing that relevant tenets are defined in reference to a specific conception of a paradigm. Within Guba and Lincoln's conception, naïve realism is a tenet of a positivist position. Even within a paradigm position, we could debate what should be included in a tenet, e.g., what counts as a naïve realist position?

A conception of a paradigm defines the characteristics of the paradigm positions that can be taken up under it. In other words, each conception defines the type of tenets that its paradigm positions must have. Guba & Lincoln, 1994 conception proposes that their paradigm positions must have, or can be distinguished by, their ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, the paradigm positions under different conceptions are defined differently and have no direct reference to each other. Although they may look similar, paradigm positions within different conceptions may be best seen as teams in different sports. One way to distinguish two conceptions of a paradigm then is to compare the characteristics they use to define their paradigm positions. If two conceptions identify different tenets that their paradigm positions must have, then they should be considered distinct conceptions. This three-level paradigm structure will become more apparent once we apply it to different paradigm conceptions below.

Kuhn's Discipline Paradigms

Kuhn presents a "historically oriented view of science," which includes the idea that communities of scientists, particularly in the natural sciences, often work under a shared set of basic assumptions about the nature of their tasks (Kuhn, 1970: x). This shared conception includes ideas about what constitutes important questions for scientists to work on and what are seen as legitimate methods and instruments for scientists to employ. The fundamental beliefs that a group of scientists share during a period which allows for the practice of "normal science" would constitute a paradigm position under Kuhn's conception. Kuhn's concept of normal science, which encompasses the activities natural scientists mostly do, refers to the work focused on solving the problems and puzzles that arise from a paradigm position. For example, in the late 1900s, many scientists proposed that light travels through ether. Belief in this possibility set about numerous experiments trying to demonstrate its existence. The wide acceptance of Einstein's work by the 1920s, which rejected the existence of ether, made most of that previous work irrelevant, but created a new set of problems and puzzles for scientists to work on (Isaacson, 2007; Kuhn, 1970).

Table 1. Levels of Paradigm Discussion.

Term	Definition	Example
Conception of a paradigm	The broad concept of a paradigm that an author presents. It will define the different positions that can be adopted under it, including specifying the type of tenets that describe distinct paradigm positions within this conception. The conception of a paradigm also defines who or what can hold a paradigm position	Guba and Lincoln (1994) present a conception of a paradigm in which the paradigm positions must have the following type of tenets: An ontology, an epistemology, and a methodology
Paradigm positions	The positions that can be held within and are defined by a specific conception of a paradigm. They are made up of sets of tenets (i.e., assumptions, beliefs, etc.). Which tenets get defined for a paradigm position is determined by the conception of a paradigm it is under	One of the paradigm positions Guba and Lincoln (1994) identify is positivism. The positivist position is defined as holding a naïve realist ontology; an objectivist epistemology; and an experimental methodology
Tenets	The specific beliefs, positions, assumptions, and other items that can make up a paradigm position	Within Guba and Lincoln's conception, naïve realist is a tenet of the positivist position

For Kuhn, paradigm positions are firmly held and run deep, such that scientists working under a particular position often do not even recognize the work done under alternative paradigms as legitimate or scientific. They are also almost completely held by scientists working on the same topic at the same time. For example, there are no well-regarded contemporary scientists who are still conducting experiments trying to locate ether. Even if there were, their work would likely not be seen as useful or legitimate science by other contemporary scientists. It is often historians who are best placed to describe the paradigm positions of an age or scientific community. With that said, Kuhn's paradigms do not constitute a "metaphysical worldview" (Masterman, 1970: 59). Paradigms are confined to directing the working of a scientific discipline at a certain point in time. Key for Kuhn's conception of science is that these shared sets of basic assumptions change over time, leading to profound disruptions to the way science is conducted. Rather than the natural sciences being a steady accumulation of discoveries, there are historical shifts in what are seen as important facts and significant scientific questions to pursue. Kuhn calls these changes "scientific revolutions" (e.g., as illustrated in the change for scientists working within the confines of Newtonian physics adopting Einstein's theory of relativity). It is not just that a new theory is adopted, but that there is a shift in the entire set of tasks that scientists see as needing to be worked on. For Kuhn, key to understanding how the natural sciences work is to recognize this interplay between periods of normal science and the profound disruptions to them.

Because a paradigm position forms the basis of the tasks scientists are working on, it cannot itself be determined scientifically. Kuhn says that "[o]bservation and experience can and must drastically restrict the range of admissible scientific belief, else there would be no science. But they cannot alone determine a particular body of such belief. An apparently arbitrary element, compounded of personal and historical accident, is always a formative ingredient of the beliefs espoused by a given scientific community at a given time" (Kuhn, 1970: 4). The ability to develop shared sets of beliefs about the nature of their tasks, i.e., to have a paradigm position, is something Kuhn sees occurring throughout history for communities of natural scientists. Evidence that a new paradigm position has arisen for the study of a topic can often be seen by examining the textbooks, scientific equipment, and the academic journals used by a community of scientists. Kuhn holds that communities of social scientists, who are more likely to have "overt disagreements… about the nature of legitimate scientific problems and methods," have mostly not had paradigm positions under his conception of a paradigm (Kuhn, 1970: viii). In fact, one of the events that led Kuhn to develop his conception of a paradigm was working with social scientists and recognizing their inability to agree on the fundamental direction of their work (Kuhn, 1970: viii).

Burrell and Morgan's Positional Paradigm

Burrell and Morgan (1979:1) hold that "[a]ll social scientists approach their subject via explicit or implicit assumptions about the nature of the social world and the way in which it may be investigated." They propose a framework for mapping social theories or social theorists along two dimensions. The first dimension relates to assumptions about the way the social world may be investigated, i.e., different philosophies of the social sciences. To conceptualize the differences in these philosophies, Burrell and Morgan propose a scale for theorists from having subjectivist to objectivist positions. To identify where on the scale theorists are, they propose focusing on four types of assumptions theorists make: ontological assumptions, epistemological assumptions, views of human nature, and methodological assumptions. The subjective side of these positions would hold a nominalist ontology (i.e., the view that social structures exist only in the minds of individuals), an anti-positivist epistemology (i.e., the rejection of there being "underlying regularities in the world of social affairs"), a voluntarism view of human nature (i.e., that people are "completely autonomous and free-willed"), and an ideographic methodology (i.e., a methodology focused on "subjective accounts" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 6)). They see the subjectivist view of the social sciences as being in line with the German idealist tradition, including Hegel and Marx. The objectivist view would hold the opposite positions and would align more with the sociological positivist tradition. The views of most social theorists would fall somewhere between the extreme subjectivist or objectivist poles.

The other main dimension for their framework regards theories of societies, with the scale ranging from a sociology of radical change to a sociology of regulation and social stability. Where theorists sit on this scale depends on their concern regarding seven features of societies, e.g., status quo versus radical change, social order versus structural conflict, actuality versus potentiality, etc. Using their two main dimensions, Burrell and Morgan identify four paradigm positions in which most social theories and social theorists can be located (Figure 1 is recreated from Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 22). Paradigm positions are defined using the four possible binary combinations of the polls of the two dimensions. For example, radical humanists hold to a subjective philosophy of the social sciences and are focused on the sociology of radical change. These four possible paradigm positions – which they call radical humanist, radical structuralist, interpretive and functionalist - make up a shared framework for better understanding and describing the positions of various social theorists vis-à-vis each other.

Within Burrell and Morgan's conception, paradigm positions are major categories representing "fundamentally different perspectives for the analysis of social phenomena" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 23). They are sets of "very basic meta-theoretical assumptions" which likely help underlie different social theories (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 23). They should be seen as "analytically distinct" (Burrell & Morgan,

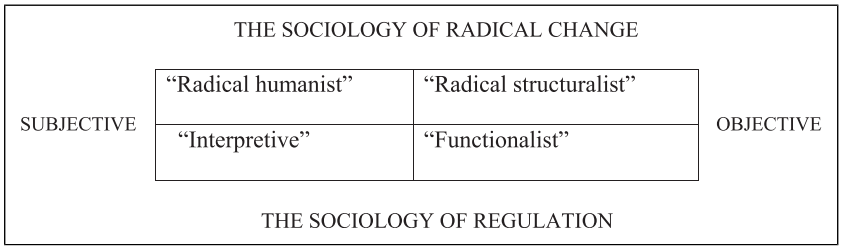

Figure 1. Burrell and Morgan's "four paradigms for the analysis of social theory".

1979: 7), so that the paradigms in the framework are mutually exclusive of each other, which likely helps serve their role as a "classificatory device" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 8). Because they are mutually exclusive, a theorist cannot adopt two paradigms at the same time. It is possible for theorists to change their paradigm, but it is rare because it would represent a fundamental break in how they approach social theory. Burrell and Morgan point to the apparent differences in the perspectives and interests of a young Karl Marx to that shown in his later writings as one potential example of a paradigm shift within their framework. While their selection is informed by the history of social thought, the dimensions are chosen, and the paradigm positions themselves do not arise from the activities of social theorists. That they do not arise from the actions of actual researchers is a way that these paradigms differ from Kuhn's paradigms. Rather they are abstract architypes which serve as a reference for better understanding the basic assumptions associated with a specific social theory. Within this framework, there will always be the same four paradigm positions regardless of what communities of social theorists do.

Taken together, Burrell and Morgan see their four-paradigm framework as "an extremely powerful tool for the analysis of social theory" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 7) and "a convenient means of identifying the basic similarities and differences between the work of various theorists" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 23). Much of the power of their framework comes from taking these four paradigm positions together and contrasting the positions of theorists against them. While there is enough commonality to say that they are working within the same general approach, especially when compared to theorists working under other paradigm positions, "within the context of any given paradigm there will be much debate between theorists who adopt different standpoints" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 23). We can perhaps think of Burrell and Morgan's four paradigm framework then as a tool for locating some of the important "overt disagreements" over fundamentals, the kind of disagreements which led Kuhn to conclude that paradigms under his conception are difficult for social scientists to achieve.

Guba and Lincoln's Researcher-Defined Paradigm

The paradigms most familiar to qualitative researchers were first developed by Guba (1978) and Lincoln and Egon (1985). In the 1970s, they and other authors initially began talking about paradigms to highlight differences between naturalistic inquiry and research approaches that favored more variable-focused, experimental models of educational research (Guba, 1978; Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Patton, 1975). Their identification of distinct paradigm positions is, however, more than a "classificatory device." While there is an expository aspect, there is also a clear argument for naturalistic inquiry in their presentation (Chafe, 2023; Guba, 1978). Advocating for a particular position contrasts with the apparently more neutral intent of Morgan and Burrell's four paradigm framework. Identifying naturalistic inquiry as a distinct paradigm position also demarks it, and later the field of qualitative research, so that it could not be simply incorporated back into more traditional research approaches (Donmoyer, 2006; Patton, 1980).

Guba and Lincoln use the term paradigm in numerous and sometimes conflicting ways. They talk about a research approach being a paradigm position. For example, they say that "[N]aturalistic inquiry is a paradigm of inquiry, that is, a pattern or model for how inquiry may be conducted" (Guba & Lincoln, 1982: 233). Guba (1978) also says that a form of inquiry, e.g., ethnography, can be "the precursor and paradigm" for another type of inquiry, e.g., naturalistic inquiry. Moving away from describing it as a type of inquiry, Lincoln and Guba (1985: 15) relate paradigms with fundamental views about the world, i.e., that "[p]aradigms represent a distillation of what we think about the world (but cannot prove)." Paradigms are also said to reflect a researcher's thoughts about their specific subject matter, i.e., that they are "axiomatic systems characterized essentially by their differing sets of assumptions about the phenomena into which they are designed to inquire" (Guba & Lincoln, 1982: 233), which seems to echo Merton's paradigm as a schema of assumptions.

Guba and Lincoln's perhaps best-known conception of a paradigm is presented in their article *Competing paradigms in qualitative research* (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This article has been identified as a key reference in many qualitative methodological texts (Creswell, 2013; Leavy, 2014) and has been cited over 30,000 times (Google Scholar, 2024). In this article, Guba and Lincoln say that "a paradigm may be viewed as a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deal with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world," the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and

its parts, as, for example, cosmologies and theologies do. The beliefs are basic in the sense that they must be accepted simply on faith" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 107).

Their conception incorporates two elements introduced by Ford (1975) in her unorthodox book *Paradigms and Fairy Tales*. Ford presents the idea that everyone has "thought paradigms," which are the ways that both experts and "ordinary people in their everyday lives" construct an account of reality. These thought paradigms are described as consisting "of thoughts wrapped up in thoughts about thoughts" (Ford, 1975: 2). Ford's intention is to reduce all scientific theories and mental constructions, including the work of the natural and social sciences, to the status of fairy tales that a person tells themselves (Perman, 1976). Following Ford, Guba and Lincoln (1985: 15) hold that a paradigm is something held by an individual person or researcher. In other words, theirs are not discipline paradigms. Guba and Lincoln also follow Ford in basing their paradigms on a metaphysical worldview, which Ford refers to as "BASIC BELIEFS." These beliefs "are our most fundamental thoughts about the ultimate nature, or 'essence" of things. They are what philosophers sometimes call ontological assumptions" (Ford, 1975: 16). This commitment to ontological foundationalism clearly separates Guba and Lincoln's conception from Kuhn's characterization of a paradigm (Kuhn, 1970; Masterman, 1970: 59). As Guba and Lincoln's claims focus on all reality, their ontological claims can be distinguished also from Burrell and Morgan's positional paradigm, which is limited to theories about the social world.

Another unique feature of Guba and Lincoln's position is their claim about how paradigm positions should be used in research. They hold that paradigm positions are "the starting points or givens that determine what inquiry is and how it is to be practiced" (Guba, 1990: 18); and as such, that researchers need to clarify their paradigm position at the beginning of the research process (Creswell, 2013:17; Denzin et al., 2024: 20-21; Denzin and Lincoln, 2017: 11–15). Including paradigm definition within the process for conducting a research project is not found in either Kuhn or Burrell and Morgan. In fact, for Kuhn, scientists may not even appreciate the paradigm that they are working under. Given their conception of a paradigm as a worldview that includes basic philosophical suppositions, it seems that Guba and Lincoln are asking individual researchers to layout their entire personal philosophical position or worldview before they can start a research project.

A key innovation of the research-defined paradigm model over the years is the expansion in the number of paradigm positions identified (Lincoln et al., 2024). Their characterization of these paradigm positions shares elements with both Kuhn and Burrell and Morgan. Like Burrell and Morgan, Guba and Lincoln's categorization uses fixed elements to classify paradigm positions. For Burrell and Morgan, it is theorists' philosophies of the social sciences and their theories of society which categorize different paradigm positions. Guba and Lincoln define paradigm positions using a researcher's ontology, epistemology and methodology views. Like Kuhn, the four paradigm positions which Guba and Lincoln identify are contingent formulations and reflect paradigm positions which communities of researchers appear to have adopted at a specific point in history. There is nothing necessary about selecting any of these positions. If the practice of inquiry changed over time, it may make sense to highlight alternative paradigm positions, which they do over different versions of their paradigm conception (Lincoln et al., 2024).

There are, however, important differences between Guba and Lincoln's and the other author's positions. Burrell and Morgan's paradigms reference a shared subject matter, i.e., theories of society, and therefore their model can illustrate "basic similarities and differences between the work of various theorists" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 23). Similarly for Kuhn, paradigm positions always refer to a specific subject matter and are limited to the beliefs that a community of scientists hold that allow for normal science to occur about that subject. Guba and Lincoln's paradigm positions reflect views effecting inquiry generally, but they are not limited or defined in relation to any specific subject area beyond a person's overall picture of reality. Even compared to the dimension of Burrell and Morgan's model focused on the theorist's philosophy of the social sciences, Guba and Lincoln expand their paradigm positions both in scope, e.g., a view of the social sciences versus a worldview; and in who has a paradigm, e.g., from social theorists to every researcher, and may be perhaps to every person (Ford, 1975; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwartz & Ogilvy, 1979). Unlike Burrell and Morgan's paradigms, these paradigms are not defined such that they are mutually exclusive of each other, to be used as a complete set of potential paradigm positions; rather the paradigm positions that Guba and Lincoln identify are just four prominent positions out of many possible positions, which they expand on over the years.

Guba and Lincoln's paradigms also raise issues for scientists who hold different paradigm positions but work on the same topic. If methodology is ultimately based on an individual's view of their reality, it is not clear what we can do to come together on a shared fairy tale. The best communities of researchers on a specific topic can do is for everyone to be explicit about their own paradigm positions and hope that some researchers, when faced with fellow researchers' conflicting paradigm positions, are willing to change their worldviews. Guba and Lincoln suggest such convergences are possible through the creation of new paradigm positions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 116). But if we take Guba and Lincoln's individually-focused ontological foundationalism seriously, for this conversion to occur, it requires that researchers not only change their view of how to study a topic. It requires that they change their basic beliefs, i.e., their "most fundamental thoughts about the ultimate nature, or essence of things" (Ford, 1975: 2). Given that these basic beliefs are ultimates that are only accepted on faith, it is not clear the mechanism through which they see these conversions occurring, although they do imply that socialization with researchers who hold divergent positions can play a role. Nor do

Guba and Lincoln discuss how dramatic such conversions would be for the researchers who underwent one. Burrell and Morgan point out, it is rare for a social theorist to change their view of society over their career. But because they work at a more fundamental level, conversions of a person's view of reality would appear to have even more consequences and bigger disruptions for a researcher. Something akin to the dramatic paradigm shifts that Kuhn located within scientific disciplines over time would, for Guba and Lincoln, seem to have to occur at the level of the individual researcher for them to take on a new paradigm. Similarly, it would seem to follow, that such a conversion could even make much of their previous work irrelevant to the researcher themselves, as it would have been developed under a different view of reality. Because on the researcher-defined paradigm model it is the researcher's ontology that directs their choice of methodology, researchers also seem to be restricted from somehow suspending their ontological beliefs to choose a shared methodology to work with someone who held a different paradigm position from them.

Comparing Conceptions of a Paradigm

The authors had different rationales for proposing their paradigm conception, which resulted in their different definitions of what a paradigm is. Kuhn wants to describe the workings of the natural sciences. In particular, he presents a new model of how both normal science and scientific revolutions occur. Burrell and Morgan aim to provide a framework for understanding the positions of social theorists. For Guba and Lincoln, the paradigms are the starting point that determine the direction of inquiry and their initial characterizations are presented as an argument for more naturalistic approaches.

In terms of definition, for Kuhn, a paradigm position is a set of assumptions shared by scientists working in the same field which allows for normal science to occur. For Burrell and Morgan, paradigm positions are sets of assumptions which can help identify major differences in the positions of social theorists. Guba and Lincoln see paradigm positions as the basic belief system or worldviews that guide a researcher. These differences lead to unique answers to the questions: who or what has a paradigm and how do they arise? For Kuhn, it is scientific communities that hold paradigm positions, with positions being somewhat contingently developed, but with a firm empirical element. For Burrell and Morgan, paradigm positions are basic binary choices in how social theorists approach the study of society. For Guba and Lincoln, a paradigm position is a worldview which the researcher holds that must be "accepted on faith."

Conceptions of paradigms can also differ concerning how explicit researchers should be about their paradigm positions and how to identify when one is achieved. For Kuhn, scientists are often not aware of their paradigmatic assumptions and sometimes it takes historians to identify the features of the position that a community of researchers held. For Burrell and Morgan, the paradigm a theorist has can be identified by analyzing their approach to their work. For Guba and Lincoln, paradigm positions relate to the individual researcher's worldview. It is only the individual researcher who knows their worldview, so they should be reflexive and explicit about the paradigmatic assumptions they hold.

Another important consideration is the scope of the tenets that they include in a paradigm position. For Kuhn, paradigm positions extend to the shared beliefs held by scientists which allow for normal science to occur. Masterman (1970) identifies Kuhn using three main categories or senses of the term paradigm related to its scope. The first is metaphysical, which refers to the shared beliefs about what specific items exist in their field of study (e.g., do ether or atoms exist?) and how they can be known. The second is sociological, which refers to the shared practices of a community of researchers. The third category is artefacts, which would include the textbooks and other instruments used by a scientific community. Burrell and Morgan limit their paradigm positions to the underlying assumptions of a social theorist, limiting their ontology concerns to theorists' conception of the social world. Guba and Lincoln's conception extends paradigm positions to include the metaphysical worldview of a researcher. Table 2 summarizes these key dimensions across the three paradigm conceptions.

Discussion

Merton famously introduced the idea of "obliteration by incorporation" to identify cases when a term, idea, concept or finding is so widely discussed or accepted that people forget its origins (Merton, 1968). The case can be made that this type of obliteration has to some degree taken place regarding paradigms within qualitative research. Most of the last two generations of researchers likely have learned that paradigms are just part of what qualitative research is; and there seems to have been little recognition of the range of paradigm characterizations available. In this article, I compared three early paradigm conceptions, showing that they represent very different conceptions of what a paradigm can be and how they can be structured. The use of paradigms within qualitative research has clearly evolved since Guba and Lincoln's original competing paradigm article (1994), but even looking at these early examples highlights some of the choices qualitative researchers could make in structuring a paradigm conception.

Guba (1990) said that there were advantages to leaving the idea of a paradigm in "a problematic limbo" by not defining it and letting the concept evolve. He made that statement over 30 years ago. Given the range of potential meanings, features they can have, the potential for confusion, and that it is a core concept in some conceptions of qualitative research, it is time to reconsider and clarify the structure and rationale for researcher-defined paradigms within qualitative research. Many of these issues were never settled by Guba and Lincoln. For example, are paradigms meant to identify assumptions or a schema for classifying different approaches to research? Or do paradigms play a role in directing all the research projects a researcher works on, so that if they worked under another

Table 2. Comparison of Four Alternative Paradigm Conceptions.

	Kuhn – Discipline paradigms	Burrell & Morgan – Positional Paradigm	Guba & Lincoln -researcher-defined Paradigms
Rationale	To describe how science works	To provide a framework for understanding the different features of social theories	Initially to promote naturalistic inquiry/later to highlight the assumptions of different researchers
Definition of a paradigm position	A set of assumptions shared by scientists working in the same scientific field that allow normal science to occur	The meta-theoretical assumptions of social theorist	The basic belief system or worldview that guides an individual researcher
Who or what has a paradigm?	A scientific community	A social theorist or theory	An individual researcher
Origin of a paradigm	Contingently developed by the scientific community, but with a firm empirical element	A 2-by-2 matrix of philosophies of the social sciences and theories of society	Arising from the worldview of the individual researcher
Scope of ontological concern	The subject matter of a field	The status of the social world	Reality/Metaphysical worldview
Relation to the research process	Helps define normal science, but not involved in the conduct of specific projects	Background assumptions for research	Part of the process of conducting specific research projects
Examples of paradigm positions	Newtonian physics, Einsteinian physics	Radical humanist, radical structuralist, interpretive, functionalist	Positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism
Types of tenets	Those required for normal science to occur; or things that illustrate that a paradigm has been achieved, e.g., textbooks	Objective or subjective philosophies of the social sciences and either social theories of radical change or stability	Ontology, epistemology, methodology

paradigm their entire program of research could be irreconcilably different, similar to going through a Kuhnian revolution? Are paradigms something every person has, something just researchers or social theorists can hold, or are they something shared only by communities of researchers working on the same topic? If paradigms are our individual perspective on the world (Ford, 1975) and that this perspective determines how you should conduct research, where do these paradigms come from and do these basic beliefs evolve over time? Can individuals adopt any paradigm position they want? How do the paradigm conceptions adopted affect qualitatively driven mixed method designs (Morse & Cheek, 2015)? Some of the complexities with these research designs seem only to arise because of the adoption of the researcher-defined paradigm model and would likely not be problematic if we constructed other paradigm conceptions. Even the question whether all research projects require explicitly defining a paradigm position; and if so, is this position something each individual researcher needs to define for themselves or can a shared paradigm be agreed to by the team, maybe even just for a single project, should be explicitly addressed? In short, there are many questions that researchers who want to continue to appeal to paradigms within qualitative research should meaningfully explore and decide on.

Many researchers are familiar with researcher-defined paradigms and feel comfortable talking about their own work in terms of a specific paradigm position. But reconsidering whether and what conception of a paradigm to adopt within qualitative research would be a useful debate to have. As an applied qualitative researcher who often works with multidisciplinary teams with various degrees of research experience, I have often found that discussing potential paradigms and ontological positions the team could adopt as not being that useful, particularly if these claims are meant to extend to competing visions of reality each person may have. Guba's conception of researcher-defined paradigms arose as a way to separate naturalistic inquirers from researchers using more experimental approaches (Chafe, 2023; Guba, 1978). The conception was not proposed to help address any issues in actually conducting qualitative or mixed-methods research or to make it easier to work in multidisciplinary, multi-stakeholder teams. In reconsidering paradigms within qualitative research, I see value in moving away from talking about paradigms altogether or adopting a conception more as a classification device for comparing the underlying assumptions of general research approaches, rather than the worldviews of individual researchers. I would also highlight positionality statements (Bourke, 2014) and conceptual schemes (Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017) as better ways to situate individual projects than requiring research teams to come to an agreement on one of the paradigm positions currently on offer. Given the alternatives, qualitative researchers

who want to continue to appeal to the model of researcher-defined paradigms at the very least should be able to justify their choice of paradigm conception, its specific features, and the position they have chosen within it.

This article does have some potential limitations. It is limited to only the analysis of three proposed conceptions of a paradigm, all three of which were published at least three decades ago. The comparison of paradigms was mostly limited to only nine features which were selected by the author. While it was focused on the different models in published texts and is supported by quotes, the analysis was also only carried out by one author. There is also some novel terminology presented in the article which will be new to some readers.

Conclusion

Paradigms have been central to some conceptions of qualitative research. This analysis illustrates that there are various paradigm conceptions we can adopt. It raises the question of whether the model of researcher-defined paradigms, which are meant to capture a researcher's worldview, best reflects the needs of current qualitative researchers. As a fundamental part of qualitative research for the last 50 years, our research community should welcome these types of discussions and hopefully greater clarity that will come with them. Most of what I have discussed relates to understanding conceptions of a paradigm, but the conception adopted has direct implications for the paradigm positions one takes. The model adopted will also impact the assumptions to which a researcher will attend. At the very least, authors defending their paradigm position should be able both to justify the conception of a paradigm they have chosen and the paradigm position they have chosen under it. I recognize that this may require more effort, but it seems necessary in order to talk about paradigms more knowledgeably. We should also continue to explore alternative approaches for qualitative researchers to present their assumptions related to specific projects.

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