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ESSAY

REVISED Qualitative hypotheses

[version 2; peer review: 2 approved, 1 approved with reservations, 1 not approved]

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Abstract

Hypotheses are not common in qualitative research. This can be largely attributed to many qualitative methods not being optimal or suitable for hypothesis-testing, and the epistemological curiosity in qualitative research often lacking interest in testing. Nonetheless, qualitative researchers, too, do often enter research projects with expectations, which are similar to hypotheses. These expectations can be useful to disclose and reflect on before a study is carried out. In this essay, I discuss qualitative hypotheses (QHs) as a means to disclose such expectations without testing them. In particular, QHs are presented as a tool that can be useful with recently proliferated reporting formats, such as a preregistration and registered reports, which involve a pre-analytic phase of written reflection.

Plain language summary

This concise essay is an encyclopaedic entry on qualitative hypotheses (QHs), which are tools for researchers to disclose their expectations without testing them. As such, the essay provides an efficient outline of QHs and aims to serve as a practical source that can help researchers decide whether using QHs is beneficial for them or not.

Keywords

Epistemology, methodology, preregistration, registered reports, meta-science

This article is included in the European Research Council (ERC) gateway.

Open Peer Review

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

The work has been revised, as follows: 1) qualitative hypotheses (QHs) are more explicitly presented as a tool for preregistration and registered reports, 2) QHs are more clearly distinguished from other tools such as positionality statements, 3) the essay now includes an in-text example, 4) a better distinction between general conceptual frameworks and QHs is provided, 5) terminological clarifications have been carried out throughout the text.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

This essay provides an encyclopaedic meta-methodological overview of *qualitative hypotheses* (QHs), which have recently emerged in the literature along with the proliferation of qualitative preregistration (e.g., Haven *et al.*, 2020) and registered reports (e.g., Demkowicz & Hickman Dunne, 2024). As QHs remain epistemologically and pragmatically undiscussed, this essay aims to initiate such discussion and help researchers assess whether QHs might be useful for them or not.

Conceptual background

Etymologically, the term 'hypothesis' derives from Greek, merging the prefix *hypo* (below) with *thesis* (statement). *Oxford English Dictionary* gives hypothesis multiple active meanings, such as the following.

> "A supposition or conjecture put forth to account for known facts; esp. in the sciences, a provisional supposition from which to draw conclusions that shall be in accordance with known facts, and which serves as a starting-point for further investigation by which it may be proved or disproved and the true theory arrived at"

The above description is easily confused by a distinct epistemic activity, 'hypothesis-testing', and statistical hypothesis-testing in particular (e.g., Field, 2022). The term 'hypothesis' carries specific meanings in such quantitative contexts and is rarely used in qualitative research designs (e.g., Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). This conceptual domain is often further complicated by derivative notions such as 'descriptive hypothesis' and 'formalised hypothesis'. I leave those terms to be debated by hypothesis-testers, as in the context of QHs, 'hypotheses' refer to provisional expectations that are not tested.

When practicing science[1], we operate with provisional expectations and suppositions each and every moment. Nevertheless, 'hypothesis' is but one of many terms, which have been used to address researchers' suppositions and expectations. For example, Maxwell's (2008) approach to qualitative research utilises the term 'conceptual framework'. Maxwell explicitly distinguishes the conceptual framework from the literature review, as the former also includes

> "communication with other researchers, and your own experience and pilot studies [as well as] theories that are particularly relevant to your research… your purpose is not only descriptive, but also critical; you need to treat 'the literature' not as an authority to be deferred to, but as a useful but fallible source of ideas [i.e.] the conceptual framework for your research study is something that is constructed, not found. It incorporates pieces that are borrowed from elsewhere, but the structure, the overall coherence, is something that you build, not something that exists ready-made" (p. 223)

In a similar but not identical way, the purpose of a QH is to disclose what researchers expect to find in a study that they are about to carry out. In contrast to the conceptual framework, however, the QH is not a holistic frame, but an articulation of the most relevant expectations regarding the upcoming findings before initiating work.

Because the expectations of a QH are not to be tested—as in hypothesis-testing paradigms—it can be useful to conceive of QHs as 'scientific hypotheses' in a metaphorical sense (e.g., Blumenberg, 1979; Goodman, 1968; Johnson, 2007). Namely, the QH is a tool with bundled features, many (but not all of) which have previously been associated with scientific hypotheses and testing. Although the QH carries features of scientific hypotheses, it does so essentially as an adaptation to the technical evolution of science, which has recently produced various pre-study reporting practices. The QH is not a novel concept for the research process itself but a tool for pre-study reporting, which did not exist in the past.

Historical background

One reason for me to write this essay is that I remain guilty of having co-introduced QHs to the scientific discourse some years ago. Beyond the below two quoted paragraphs, conceptualisations of QHs have not, to my knowledge, entered the meta-methodological discourse. Initially, we did not present the QH as a meta-methodological tool, but conceived it for pragmatic reasons to meet the technical expectations of a *registered report* plan (for readers unfamiliar with registered reports, see e.g., Henderson & Chambers, 2022).

Apparently, our study was the first registered report driven by qualitative data and methods, which put us into a position of needing to creatively navigate submission guidelines that were intended for hypothesis-testing designs. When having our phenomenologically oriented research plan in peer review—before the study was carried out—we followed the guidelines and inserted two hypotheses. Alas, as our work did not aim to *test* hypotheses, we provided the following description:

> "By qualitative hypotheses we mean that the goal is not to seek confirming and falsifying evidence, and we will not claim the data to (not) support the alternative hypotheses (or null). This is because qualitative research, at least in the presently applied interpretive phenomenological

[1] I am using the term 'science' with awareness that some readers might link the matters at hand to wider epistemic and disciplinary conversations where other terms like 'research' and 'scholarship' serve as differently signifying alternatives.

> form, is not well suited for null hypothesis significance testing. That said, we do consider phenomenological research suitable for another kind of significance testing—significance as *meaning*—and because these forms of significance already have an existing basis in the literature, disclosing this basis openly in the form of qualitative hypotheses will add to the transparency of the work. Accordingly, we consider it important to set hypotheses *not to test hypotheses, but rather because we want to disclose our hypothetical biases*." (Karhulahti *et al.*, 2022; future tense has been changed in final publication)

Reading the above years later, I would now add that researchers' expectations never derive solely from the literature but various sources in our subjective histories, and the QH is thus not to be confused with the literature or its review alone (recall Maxwell earlier). Moreover, I would remove the emphasis on 'hypothetical biases'—even though they remain relevant for some studies—and replace that with a more epistemically flexible 'researcher subjectivity' (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2023). Not all research epistemologies operate with bias, and researcher subjectivity better accounts for those epistemological frameworks as well.

When doing qualitative research, or any other research for that matter, we usually have expectations about what we are going to find out. We may not be fully aware of those expectations, as they are likely to align with our fundamental beliefs and positions, which often entail reflexive effort to be made visible. We may also operate under disciplinary, theoretical, or 'state of art' understandings of our fields, which shape what we (are expecting to) see in the results. Reflecting on these aspects was the intended purpose of our QHs. A year later, in a primer for qualitative registered reports, we wrote another section that aimed to summarise this idea:

> "It is uncommon (but not impossible) for qualitative research designs to test hypotheses. On the other hand, it is also possible to set hypotheses without testing them. These 'qualitative hypotheses' (QHs) can be used in a similar way as positionality statements, i.e. to report the team's prior beliefs and hypothetical biases, which can affect the study design and its procedures… Unlike positionality statements, QHs are based on previous data, literature, and theory, which have influenced the study design and may influence data interpretation, thus being akin to 'priors' in Bayesian statistical designs" (Karhulahti *et al.*, 2023)

Unlike positionality statements, which disclose the researcher's general position relative to a research topic (e.g. Penders *et al.*, 2025), the QH is a disclosure of priors explicitly about the *research question* at hand. For example, personal values that are commonly disclosed in positionality statements would be meaningless to fit in most QHs—even though personal values may meaningfully *affect* one's QHs. Put another way, one and the same statement of positionality could be used for multiple studies of a research project, but each of the project's studies with distinct research questions would also entail distinct QHs. Next, I elaborate on QHs by addressing their use and functions.

Use and functions

Use. In many qualitative and related research traditions, such as ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), scholars standardly reflect on their updated priors or shifted perspectives during and after the work. Such reflections are a vital part of knowledge development; nonetheless, explicitly stating reflexive expectations prior to initiating work sets QHs apart from conventional reflexive practice. Any hypothesis is a prognostic by definition, and accordingly, the utility of QHs is based on having them *before* the study is carried out. Adding QHs after a study is completed would not be useful. Hence, QHs serve primary as tools for qualitative preregistrations and registered reports, which involve written pre-study reflection.

As it goes with other scientific hypotheses, QHs can be used with different methods and types of data. The word 'qualitative' carries a double meaning in QHs, referring to both the descriptive nature of QH formulation and its plausible application in qualitative research in particular. Unlike statistical priors, QHs are qualitative descriptions that do not aim to formalise an expectation. The accuracy and depth of a QH depends on the researchers and their study design, and such features should be decided with pragmatics in mind. As to the plausible context of application, in turn, QHs match best with qualitative research traditions where other types of hypotheses are rarely used. Naturally, it is possible to include QHs in quantitative and other research designs too (see Smith, 2005), but that should be done knowingly, i.e. with an identified function and relevance.

Functions. At the time of writing, I see three potential functions associated with QHs. First, adding QHs either to a preregistration or a registered report can encourage researchers to *reflect* on their expectations. Similar benefits have been proposed for preregistration and registered reports in general, as they encourage—and in the latter case also potentially enforce—researchers to think through various details of the research plan before conducting the work. Haven & van Grootel (2019) phrase this clearly:

> "Preregistration does not have to challenge the subjectivity crucial to qualitative research; on the contrary, it underlines the importance of subjectivity by encouraging qualitative researchers to reflect upon their *a priori* values by enabling the researcher to make these values transparent for other researchers from the start of the research" (p. 237)

Consequently, and second, adding QHs to a preregistration or a registered report also contributes to *transparency*. When writing down one's expectations as a QH, a researcher goes through a reflective process where they mirror subjective pre-knowledge of the question under study. The depth and fidelity of such process is researcher-specific, but if and when disclosed, also subject to external evaluation and critical discussion. Regardless of whether the researchers' expectations are met or not, having them spelled out in a QH will enable readers, reviewers, and the researchers themselves look back. Obtaining findings that go against QHs should not have negative impact on the

evaluation of the work, but merely implies that the unexpected has been discovered. Verbal descriptions of QHs should not be optimised to be 'supported' later (e.g. by language that covers a maximal range of outcomes); instead, they should disclose relevant expectations, which are valuable to reflect on later.

Third, as adding QHs to a preregistration or a registered report documents the researchers' expectations as metadata, this allows both readers and researchers to *update* their beliefs in a dialogic manner. Because QHs are not tested, it may not always be useful to discuss them in detail after the study has been carried out. However, when the findings go against or otherwise differ from registered QHs, this creates a transparent opportunity to address such issues and reflect on how and why the process has (not) updated the researchers' views regarding the studied topic.

Case example

To provide an illustration in practice, I refer to a recent qualitative study (Hickman Dunne *et al.*, 2025), which investigated how motivations in adolescent social media use relate to mental health (RQ1) and how the experiences of such use manifest from a mental health point of view (RQ2). Utilizing reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023), the authors analysed adolescent (n=26) focus group data and set two QHs before the start the work:

> *QH1: We expect heterogeneity in the motivations and experiences of social media use and types of platforms used, especially between different age groups.*
>
> *QH2: We expect that social media experience will be multidimensional with key dimensions like cyberbullying, social comparison, fear of missing out, and social support and connection to be discussed.*

In the current case, the QHs reflected both the authors' interpretation of relevant literature as well as their subjective beliefs and perspectives on the research questions. Although the study did not involve a pilot, the QHs had been co-produced by three young researchers who had been recruited from a consultancy organisation to enrich the team's understanding of the topic. After the completion of the study, the authors reflected on their QHs:

> "extending our understanding of H1, not only is there between-person variation, including some possible differences across age and gender, but there also appears to be within-person variation. Young people described different and often polarised experiences resulting from similar activities, based on, for example, the context within which they were using social media, their mood state, or an anticipated or actual social interaction… multiple dimensions of social media experience (H2) reflected in the current sample were expressed in a complex way. Whilst we designed the focus group schedule to focus one at a time on each of perceptions, motivations, activities, and experiences, discussion of these was overlapping, indicating that for young people, social media experience is not clearly disentangled along such lines. The learnings relating to the study hypotheses show that the relationship between motivations, behaviours and experiences in relation to social media use may therefore not be as straightforward" (pp. 15–16)

The post-study reflections illustrate the researchers' updated priors and how their thinking of the subject matter changed throughout the research process. Even though similar reflections would be possible to disclose without written QHs as well, pre-study expectations and beliefs like the above would have been more difficult to recall without having spelled them out as QHs earlier. In other words, the QHs served as a technical tool to support reflexive practice.[2]

Limitations

Because using QHs entails technical means to state them before a study is carried out, their application is limited to researchers who have access to (and find their work benefitting from) preregistration, registered reports, or other reporting innovations with a pre-study phase. As tools that support reflexive practice, QHs do not appear to be constrained so much by epistemological differences as they are by technical limits.

It is important to stress that QHs do not automatically improve a study and they should not be applied without considering how they contribute to a specific study. For example, it is possible that researchers do not have any meaningful expectations about their findings, which may be a sufficient reason to

[2] For the curious reader, this footnote offers a second example from the published literature. In our original study (Karhulahti *et al.*, 2022), we set the following two QHs:

"QH1: We expect participants with gaming-related health problems (as defined by treatment-seeking) to talk about their gaming experiences in the context of neglected needs or responsibilities, loss of control, and social difficulties. For them, meaning(s) in gaming compensate for these issues. We do not expect our esports gaming participants (self-reporting no health problems related to gaming) to express the above.

QH2: We expect the esports gaming participants (self-reporting no gaming-related health problems) and the participants with related health problems (as defined by treatment-seeking) to find gaming meaningful to their lives, as expressed by pursued self-development in their games as well as the social value given to it—but only the latter to experience significant life conflicts."

After the study, we reflected on those QHs as follows:

"First, while our trust in neglected needs/responsibilities and loss of control as the core aspects of gaming-related health problems remains strong (QH1), we further hypothesize that—in the current era of cultural and technological progress—such problems (as defined by clinical treatment-seeking) are a unique outcome of having faced abuse, discrimination, or other forms of mistreatment in childhood and/or adolescence development, which has made gaming meaningful in a protective, coping-type way… Second, compared to our priors, we now believe "self-development" to be less commonly a central meaning component for both treatment-seekers and esports players, as even some of the latter explicitly expressed their gaming to be meaningful for other reasons (QH2). Likewise, individuals in both groups expressed significant life conflicts—but only the latter had been able to efficiently resolve them. As a new hypothesis, we propose that gaming-related treatment-seeking in adulthood is significantly connected to a reconstruction of personal values

omit QHs. On the other hand, because one of the functions of QHs is to explicitly encourage reflection, it is important to distinguish a genuine lack of expectations from a mere lack of reflection.

We should also be cognisant and remain open to other conditions under which QHs may not be useful. For instance, in large studies with multiple authors it may be difficult to utilise QHs in a pragmatic manner. On the other hand, just like 'collective positionality' has emerged as a distinct type of reflexivity statement that reflects on team compositions rather than researcher subjectivities (e.g., Penders *et al.*, 2025), it is possible that similar functional variation emerges in the application of QHs in the future.

The concept of QHs is not mine to own, and how I have visioned them to operate remains to be challenged, ignored, and refuted. Those willing to use QHs in any modified form that suits their needs best are encouraged to do so. In short, researchers should contemplate case-by-case whether the above or other functions of QHs yield their study meaningful benefits.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

No data associated with this article.

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✘ **Stefan Reichmann**
Graz University of Technology, Graz, Austria

This is a timely contribution in that it seeks to elucidate the relationship between open research methods, most notably preregistration, and qualitative research (or rather, certain aspects of qualitative research). This is achieved by investigating the role of hypotheses in qualitative research (referred to as qualitative hypotheses).

My main criticism of the paper is this: Given that it seeks to elucidate the role of hypotheses in qualitative research, I would expect a thorough engagement with qualitative methodologies, specifically as the contribution contains a section labelled “Historical Background”. This suggests that while the author is a qualitative researcher (or seems to be by their own account), the paper is actually not written from the point of view of qualitative research, but rather tries to accommodate a rather incomplete picture of working qualitatively with registered reports (which is a tool specific to a rather narrow understanding of research).

In particular, qualitative research needs to be thoroughly demarcated from positive science in that each follows very different methodological assumptions. While positive science is characterized by the separation of subject and object, wanting to achieve reliability, reproducibility, and representativeness. This, it tries to achieve through excluding reactivity, e.g. by constructing standardized methods of data collection, and by analyzing data according to statistical models.

Qualitative research is characterized by intervention (i.e., qualitative researchers are in close contact with their field, they often intervene into their subjects lived experience), process, structuring, and theory reconstruction. In this, qualitative research tries to mobilize the contextual effects between interviewer, respondent, field, and situation, instead of trying to eliminate them (this is, after all, the point of standardized research). Qualitative methods are not standardized by definition (which means, indeed, that “methods” might be a bit of stretch). Contextual effects in positive science correspond to the power effects of qualitative research (domination, silencing, objectification, and normalization). I would like to stress that both models of science are necessary, and both have their strengths and weaknesses.

However, the paper evidently tries to analyze (or even colonize) qualitative research from the vantage point of positive science, without any deeper engagement with the methodological assumptions of either. Indeed, the paper contains scant engagement with the epistemological assumptions of qualitative research. Had this been done, the discussion of "researcher subjectivities" and "hypothetical biases", which very clearly is a projection from quantitative assumptions, could have been omitted and replaced by engagement with a terminology much closer to the letter of qualitative research, namely "lived experience". Similar to the people under study, qualitative researchers (and all other researchers for that matter) are defined by their lived experience and need to make this explicit in the research process. In so doing, they will inevitably develop (and refine) their own assumptions about their objects (or rather subjects) of study. However, I don't think likening this process to hypothesis testing as known from quantitative methods serves to elucidate what is going on.

To make this contribution fly, I think the author needs to 1) take the qualitative research tradition (or rather, traditions) seriously, and reconstruct, based on studying original sources ("classic" studies, methods papers, but also text books, which are in ample supply), just how qualitative researchers have theorized their own approaches, following diverse traditions in philosophy, sociology, anthropology, among others, and how these have translated into distinct methodologies. 2) these texts need to be analyzed for what they have to say on "lived experience", respectively the role of prior knowledge in the qualitative research process. This can be learned either by studying those aspects of empirical papers that describe how qualitative researchers entered into their field, and/or by studying methodological papers or even textbooks with a view towards this question. I suspect that such an analysis will render the original point of the contribution moot, in that it will reveal how qualitative researchers have always been very keen to explicate, or at least elucidate, their prior assumptions when going into the field. This is especially striking given that the contribution purports to talk about the historical background (presumably, of qualitative research), but effectively only introduces qualitative research from the perspective of quantitative research.

Given these obvious omissions, then, it seems especially odd that the author introduces their work, in the abstract, as follows:
"Hypotheses are not common in qualitative research. This can be largely attributed to many qualitative methods not being optimal or suitable for hypothesis-testing, and the epistemological curiosity in qualitative research often lacking interest in testing. Nonetheless, qualitative researchers, too, do often enter research projects with expectations, which are similar to hypotheses."

I found this very striking because in most methodological and/or empirical traditions labelled "qualitative" (e.g. ethnomethodology, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, to name but a few), the aim is quite explicitly not to test hypotheses, precisely to preserve maximum openness. I am trying to be understated when I say that in that sense, stating that "qualitative research often lack[s] interest in testing" seems to be a gross misinterpretation – qualitative research is not just a different way of doing effectively the same things as quantitative researchers do, but rather its own methodological tradition with its own epistemology. Indeed, in the section labelled "Use and Functions", the author confounds a methodological approach (grounded theory) with an empirical method (ethnography). While it is true that both are "traditions" in a relatively broad sense, the phrase obstructs a deeper understanding of their differences. Further, the section quotes from an earlier contribution to say that "qualitative research, at least in the

presently applied interpretive phenomenological form, is not well suited for null hypothesis significance testing" – this is completely true of course, but as it is not the aim of qualitative research to develop and test hypotheses, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.

I cannot, then, help but wonder whether a more thorough engagement with the qualitative tradition would have yielded a better approach to the paper as well, in reflexively applying the kind of openness the author demands from qualitative researchers, to – at the very least – make explicit how their own assumptions about qualitative research are largely driven by assumptions from its opponents. Indeed, the author explicitly states that the research into qualitative hypotheses has been driven by a desire to "meet the technical expectations of a registered report". De facto, then, the approach is not so much about elucidating qualitative hypotheses as it is about remodeling qualitative research in the image of quantitative research. This especially evident in frequent evocations of "the subjective", for instance in the following sentence: "researchers' expectations never derive solely from the literature but various sources in our subjective histories", and further, "I would remove the emphasis on 'hypothetical biases'—even though they remain relevant for some studies—and replace that with a more epistemically flexible 'researcher subjectivity'" – without further analysis of what qualitative research actually tries to achieve, this is a roundabout dismissal in that the author retains the links from subjectivity to bias, omitting that qualitative research is essentially about mobilizing the lived experience of researchers.

In summary, I think the contribution lacks a thorough engagement (or even just a definition) of what qualitative research is or tries to achieve. I realize that this would be hard to achieve in a single paper, but I believe that if the contribution wants to be convincing, it needs to do three things: 1) provide a definition, better yet, a historical overview (can be brief) of qualitative research so that the reader can get a better picture of where hypotheses might fit in qualitative research, 2) provide a comparison between the core methodological assumptions of qualitative versus quantitative research, 3) analyze the potential role of qualitative hypotheses based on 1) and 2).

I think Michael Burawoy's paper on what he calls the extended case method (Burawoy 1998), although certainly opinionated, would be an excellent starting point here in that it attempts 2). In it, Burawoy contrasts the model of positive science (represented by survey research) with reflexive science. In his analysis, positive science is characterized by the separation of subject and object, by reliability, reproducibility and representativeness, and by the exclusion of reactivity, while reflexive science, on the other hand, is characterized by intervention, process, structuring, and theory reconstruction.

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Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?

No

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?

Partly

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?

No

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Open Science, particularly Open Research Infrastructures, RDM & FAIR principles, qualitative research, sociology of science/STS

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to state that I do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Reviewer Report 01 September 2025

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Bart Penders
Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands

The revision (revised version = version 2) is accompanied by a very brief note, leaving a lot of the changes to be diagnosed by the reader. I would recommend the inclusion of a more extensive discussion of changes next time.

The conceptual reframing of the Qualitative Hypothesis (QH), its relative positive compared to Quantitative Hypotheses, meant for testing, positionality statements and theory and literature in general, has been greatly improved in this version. This extends to the in-text use of an example, displaying what QHs could look like and what they could do in practice.

The claims the essay makes were and still are modest. In this state, I can recommend its acceptance.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Science and Technology Studies, Sociology of Science

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 28 August 2025

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.22856.r57810

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Joseph Dave Pregoner
Philippine Christian University, Manila, Metro Manila, Philippines

The author has succinctly and adequately addressed all my comments. The revisions have improved the clarity and quality of the manuscript, and the paper is now in order for acceptance.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Research methodologies

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 06 June 2025

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.21348.r54177

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Bart Penders
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Review of “Qualitative hypotheses”

This very brief paper attempts both a conceptual history, and an operationalization of the concept of the “qualitative hypothesis” (QH).

In the first section (“Conceptual background”), the author immediately makes the connection to the concept of the auxiliary hypothesis and commits to discussing the QH outside of the “testing frame”. In its simplest form, any hypothesis that is not foregrounded for the benefit of testing, is one of the many known and unknown auxiliary hypotheses (AH). That raises the question about what would be so special about QH’s that they need to be set apart from AH’s?

The QH is then set up as an instrument for disclosing expectations – which is repeated in the next section “Historical Background”. There is also expanded into the output of reflections about tacit

expectations originating from one's epistemic community. Again positioned as an instrument, the author likens it to a 'positionality statement'.

When the author moves into discussion use (why usage?), function and limitations, the essay is missing examples. For example, the QH is positioned as a reflection on expectations prior to a study, and contrasted to reflections on expectations (and more) after a study. While the temporal dimension is clear, conceptually this isn't. In the case of quantitative hypothesis testing, preregistration (or registered reports) can, will and should contain information about under which conditions a hypothesis is accepted and when it is rejected. In the case of QH's, such decisions are absent and the value of the temporal separation remains opaque. Is it only the strategic adoption of quantitative language to continue to participate in its bureaucratic innovations (such as preregistration and RR's)? Here, an example – whether drawn from an actual research setting or even in the form of a thought experiment, would greatly benefit the essay's persuasiveness. This extends to the discussion of function, where reflection is quite clear in the abstract, but transparency would benefit from concreteness.

The examples in the last footnote (why in a footnote?) could serve this purpose a little bit, but they also raise the question of how much of a QH is tacit expectation and how much of it is the result of a decent literature review and/or pilot study (which of course needs to be referenced. I am quite curious about the boundary between the two, according to the author. It resonates a little bit with thinking on concepts in the 17th century, where The origin and nature of concepts was a central issue in the debate between rationalists, who believed that concepts were based on innate ideas, whereas empiricists believed that concepts were human products, based on empirical (mainly sensory) data.

Interestingly, where the author draws multiple parallels to positionality, in the limitation section the collective dimension of QHs is left as a problem or concern whereas in terms of positionality, this matter has received a lot of attention under the banner of "collaborative positionality".

Overall, the author consistently refers to the QH as a concept. I would like to challenge the implicit assumption that it is (already) deserving of the label (reject the QH that QH is a concept). Instead, I would argue that it can be a metaphor, which assists us in tapping into the value of some of the protocolized thinking from qualitative epistemologies to the benefit of qualitative studies. Metaphors may be quite distinct from concepts. For instance, in Hans Blumenberg's theory of non-conceptuality, he argues that non-conceptual forms of thought, like myth and metaphor, are not just pre-conceptual and on their way eventually be replaced by conceptuality. No, they play a crucial role in human understanding by themselves, less constrained than formal concepts and less connected to concrete theories.

The notion of QH warrants such an encyclopedic style of documentation. It would benefit a lot from a more consistent comparison with existing work on positionality, focusing specifically on what it does that positionality cannot. In part, I think that the answer lies in its value as a metaphor, bundling the translation (in the Latourian sense) of valuable elements from quantitative thinking into elements that are valuable to qualitative research, with the ability to strategically wield certain language.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?

Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Partly

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Partly

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Science and Technology Studies, Sociology of Science

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 02 Aug 2025

Veli-Matti Karhulahti

Thank you for engaging with the manuscript in such depth and providing constructive suggestions, which helped to improve the work. I have revised the structure and content of the essay significantly; however, in order to maintain the encyclopedic format and keep the text informative for a wide range of readers, some of the solutions are light and would deserve further discussion in a separate context. Below, I respond to the main comments one by one and elaborate on some of those topics.

1. "*That raises the question about what would be so special about QH's that they need to be set apart from AH's?*" → I agree the original framing was not clear. I have now further specified the identity of QHs in relation to related concepts, and highlighted its role as a tool rather than a concept in the research process.
2. "*When the author moves into discussion use (why usage?), function and limitations, the essay is missing examples.*" → I agree that an example was needed to clarify usage. I have added a new section with an example.
3. "*Is it only the strategic adoption of quantitative language to continue to participate in its bureaucratic innovations (such as preregistration and RR's)?*" → As a Wittgenstein at heart, I do believe it matters how we play the language game but in this case, it feels participation in innovations is even more relevant. I have further highlighted the QH as a "tool" and specifically one that has come to exist along with technical innnovation in preregs and RRs.
4. "*how much of a QH is tacit expectation and how much of it is the result of a decent literature review and/or pilot study (which of course needs to be referenced. I am quite curious about the boundary between the two, according to the author. It resonates a little bit with thinking on concepts in the 17th century, where the origin and nature of concepts was a central issue in the debate*" → This is a large and highly intersting question, which would deserve separate discussion outside the essay. Although I've now addressed the distinction

between literature reviews and QHs, there remains an open question *how* e.g. positionality affects our expectations/QHs (i.e. to what degree it's possible to distinguish inherent expectations from others, and how it matters).

5. "*Interestingly, where the author draws multiple parallels to positionality, in the limitation section the collective dimension of QHs is left as a problem or concern whereas in terms of positionality, this matter has received a lot of attention under the banner of collaborative positionality*" I've revised this part. Some other time, I'd like to challenge the idea of 'collaborative positionality' a bit. Similarly to the hypotheses at hand, I see collaborative positionality to be 'positionality' only in a metaphorical sense; it lacks the very essenence of positionality (direct engagement with reseracher subjectivity) and thus serves a function that's similar on the surface but different in essence.
6. "*I would argue that it can be a metaphor, which assists us in tapping into the value of some of the protocolized thinking from qualitative epistemologies to the benefit of qualitative studies. Metaphors may be quite distinct from concepts.*" This was very insightful and helped me to better understand QHs. I hadn't read primary sources of Blumenberg earlier; I now read one book (cited) and non-conceptuality seems to tap on similar points to Lakoff & Johnson and to some limited extent Goodman. For this short essay (not least because detailed theoretical scrutiny would take a lot of time), I decided to keep the reference to metaphor brief; nonetheless, the wider impact of this insight can be read throughout the text.
7. "It would benefit a lot from a more consistent comparison with existing work on positionality, focusing specifically on what it does that positionality cannot." This has been added.

Thank you again for all valuable feedback, which significanitly helped to improve the work.
Veli-Matti Karhulahti

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 03 June 2025

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Kavita Dehalwar
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Review Comments:
1. Contribution and Originality
Comment:
The essay addresses a novel and underexplored topic—qualitative hypotheses (QHs)—which is both timely and relevant given the growing interest in preregistration and meta-scientific practices

within qualitative research. The discussion offers a potentially valuable conceptual contribution by proposing QHs as tools for hypothesis disclosure without testing.

Recommendation:

Consider further clarifying how QHs practically differ from general expectations or sensitising concepts already used in qualitative frameworks such as grounded theory or ethnography. This would help delineate QHs more precisely as a standalone construct.

2. Conceptual Clarity

Comment:

The essay presents a strong etymological and philosophical grounding of the term "hypothesis." However, the transition from general philosophical ideas to the notion of QHs could be made more explicit.

Recommendation:

Strengthen the bridge between the conceptual background and the specific operationalization of QHs. For instance, how do QHs relate to epistemological positions in qualitative research (e.g., constructivism, interpretivism)? Are QHs compatible with all qualitative traditions?

3. Structure and Coherence

Comment:

The structure of the essay is broadly logical, moving from definition to discussion. However, some sections could benefit from clearer subheadings or signposting.

Recommendation:

Use clear subheadings such as "Definition of Qualitative Hypotheses," "Functions of QHs," and "Limitations and Challenges" to aid reader navigation and clarify the essay's argumentative progression.

4. Literature Integration

Comment:

The essay refers to recent developments (e.g., Haven et al., 2020; Demkowicz & Hickman Dunne, 2024), but the overall literature base could be strengthened. The suggestion to cite Dehalwar & Sharma (2023, 2024) is noted, but these appear to be general methodological texts.

Recommendation:

Include more targeted citations from the meta-methodological or qualitative research literature that directly engage with the issues of hypothesis generation, expectation disclosure, or transparency (e.g., Braun & Clarke on thematic analysis; Maxwell on conceptual frameworks in qualitative inquiry). Ensure that the suggested references are integrated meaningfully, rather than listed perfunctorily.

5. Argument Development

Comment:

While the essay proposes QHs as useful tools, the specific advantages and risks are not sufficiently unpacked.

Recommendation:

Elaborate more concretely on the **functions** of QHs (e.g., enhancing transparency, framing inquiry) versus their **limitations** (e.g., risk of reintroducing positivist biases, misinterpretation as testable claims). Use hypothetical examples or case studies to illustrate.

6. Language and Style

Comment:

The prose is generally clear, but some phrasing (e.g., “accidentally,” “summon the term”) may come across as informal or ambiguous in an academic context.

Recommendation:
Refine the tone for consistency with scholarly writing. For instance, “accidentally introduced” might be better framed as “emerged organically” or “informally adopted without theoretical clarification.”**7. Supporting General Background on Research Methodologies**
Original Text (from your essay):
"This essay provides a concise meta-methodological overview of qualitative hypotheses (QHs)..."
Suggested Addition with Citation:
"This essay provides a concise meta-methodological overview of qualitative hypotheses (QHs), situated within broader discussions on research methodologies and their distinct epistemological underpinnings (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2023; Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024)."
Original Text (from your essay):
"For a long time, the above state of affairs has been confused by a distinct epistemic activity, ‘hypothesis testing’, and statistical hypothesis testing in particular..."
Suggested Addition with Citation:
"For a long time, the above state of affairs has been confused by a distinct epistemic activity, ‘hypothesis testing’, and statistical hypothesis testing in particular, which is typically aligned with quantitative paradigms (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). In contrast, qualitative research prioritizes interpretive understanding over formal testing frameworks."
Reference List Formatting (APA 7th Edition):
Dehalwar, K., & Sharma, S. N. (2023). *Fundamentals of research writing and uses of research methodologies*. Edupedia Publications Pvt Ltd.
Dehalwar, K. S. S. N., & Sharma, S. N. (2024). Exploring the distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research methods. *Think India Journal, 27*(1), 7–15.
8. Final Notes and Suggestions
Comment:
This essay offers a valuable starting point for a wider conversation about expectations and disclosure in qualitative research. With stronger theoretical integration and clearer structure, it could significantly enrich methodological debates.
Recommendation:
Consider concluding with specific recommendations for researchers or editors regarding when and how QHs might be integrated into research design, preregistration, or reporting practices.

References
1. Sharma S, Dehalwar K: Assessing the Transit-Oriented Development and Travel Behavior of the Residents in Developing Countries: A Case of Delhi, India. *Journal of Urban Planning and Development*. 2025; **151** (3). Publisher Full Text

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
No

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: ReviewComments:1. Contribution and OriginalityComment:The essay addresses a novel and underexplored topic—qualitative hypotheses(QHs)—which is both timely and relevant given the growing interest inpreregistration and meta-scientific practices within qualitative research. Thediscussion offers a potentially valuable conceptual contribution by proposingQHs as tools for hypothesis disclosure without testing.Recommendation:Consider further clarifying how QHs practically differ from generalexpectations or sensitising concepts already used in qualitative frameworkssuch as grounded theory or ethnography. This would help delineate QHs moreprecisely as a standalone construct.2. Conceptual ClarityComment:The essay presents a strong etymological and philosophical grounding of theterm "hypothesis." However, the transition from general philosophicalideas to the notion of QHs could be made more explicit.Recommendation:Strengthen the bridge between the conceptual background and the specificoperationalization of QHs. For instance, how do QHs relate to epistemologicalpositions in qualitative research (e.g., constructivism, interpretivism)? AreQHs compatible with all qualitative traditions?3. Structure and CoherenceComment:The structure of the essay is broadly logical, moving from definition todiscussion. However, some sections could benefit from clearer subheadings orsignposting.Recommendation:Use clear subheadings such as "Definition of Qualitative Hypotheses,""Functions of QHs," and "Limitations and Challenges" to aidreader navigation and clarify the essay’s argumentative progression.4. Literature IntegrationComment:The essay refers to recent developments (e.g., Haven et al., 2020; Demkowicz& Hickman Dunne, 2024), but the overall literature base could bestrengthened. The suggestion to cite Dehalwar & Sharma (2023, 2024) isnoted, but these appear to be general methodological texts.Recommendation:Include more targeted citations from the meta-methodological or qualitativeresearch literature that directly engage with the issues of hypothesisgeneration, expectation disclosure, or transparency (e.g., Braun & Clarkeon thematic analysis; Maxwell on conceptual frameworks in qualitative inquiry).Ensure that the suggested references are integrated meaningfully, rather thanlisted perfunctorily.5. Argument DevelopmentComment:While the essay proposes QHs as useful tools, the specific advantages and risksare not sufficiently unpacked.Recommendation:Elaborate more concretely on the functions of QHs (e.g., enhancingtransparency, framing inquiry) versus their limitations (e.g., risk ofreintroducing positivist biases, misinterpretation as testable claims). Usehypothetical examples or case studies to illustrate.6. Language and StyleComment:The prose is generally clear, but some phrasing (e.g., “accidentally,” “summonthe term”) may come across as informal or ambiguous in an academic context.Recommendation:Refine the tone for consistency with scholarly writing. For instance,“accidentally introduced” might be better framed as “emerged organically” or“informally adopted without theoretical clarification.”7. Supporting General Background on Research MethodologiesOriginal Text (from your essay):"This essay provides a concisemeta-methodological overview of qualitative hypotheses (QHs)..."Suggested Addition with Citation:"This essay provides

a concisemeta-methodological overview of qualitative hypotheses (QHs), situated withinbroader discussions on research methodologies and their distinctepistemological underpinnings (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2023; Dehalwar & Sharma,2024)."Original Text (from your essay):"For a long time, the above state ofaffairs has been confused by a distinct epistemic activity, ‘hypothesistesting’, and statistical hypothesis testing in particular..."Suggested Addition with Citation:"For a long time, the above state ofaffairs has been confused by a distinct epistemic activity, ‘hypothesistesting’, and statistical hypothesis testing in particular, which is typicallyaligned with quantitative paradigms (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). In contrast,qualitative research prioritizes interpretive understanding over formal testingframeworks."ReferenceList Formatting (APA 7th Edition):Dehalwar, K., & Sharma, S. N. (2023). Fundamentalsof research writing and uses of research methodologies. EdupediaPublications Pvt Ltd.Dehalwar, K. S. S. N., & Sharma, S. N. (2024). Exploring the distinctionsbetween quantitative and qualitative research methods. Think India Journal,27(1), 7–15.8. Final Notes and SuggestionsComment:This essay offers a valuable starting point for a wider conversation aboutexpectations and disclosure in qualitative research. With stronger theoreticalintegration and clearer structure, it could significantly enrich methodologicaldebates.Recommendation:Consider concluding with specific recommendations for researchers or editorsregarding when and how QHs might be integrated into research design,preregistration, or reporting practices.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 02 Aug 2025

Veli-Matti Karhulahti

Thank you for the helpful and review feedback. I have taken each point into consideration and respond to them below one by one. As a general note, I have tried to maintain the encyclopedic format, i.e. keep the text accessible to a wide range of readers and not make it longer than necessary. For this reason, the discussion of some aspects, such as epistemic ones, remains relatively light but is now explicit.

1. “Consider further clarifying how QHs practically differ from general expectation” I have clarified the differences with comparisons to concepts, which are related to QHs. Ethnography, grounded theory, and reflexive thematic analyses are noted.
2. “Strengthen the bridge between the conceptual background and the specific operationalization of QHs” Epistemology and other aspects of qualitative traditions are now addressed in more detail.
3. “Use clear subheadings” I have revised the section structure.
4. “The suggestion to cite Dehalwar & Sharma (2023, 2024) is noted” I read one of the sources, and I agree it serves as a general reference to hypotheses testing; it is now cited to support a claim. In particular, the suggested citation from Maxwell was very helpful, and it is given more space to clarify QHs.
5. “Use hypothetical examples or case studies to illustrate.” An example has been added.

6. “Refine the tone for consistency with scholarly writing. ” I have updated language, but some of the personal (first person) tone has been intentionally left due to the content involving a personal element.
7. “Consider concluding with specific recommendations for researchers or editors regarding when and how QHs might be integrated into research design, preregistration, or reporting practices.” The mode of integration (writing QHs into preregistrations and RRs) has now been made more explicitly throughout the text. I considered ending the text with additional recommendations, but concluded that it is currently premature and we need more actual use cases before recommendations can be given.

One more thank you for all valuable feedback and helping to improve the work. Veli-Matti Karhulahti

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 03 June 2025

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.21348.r54445

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Joseph Dave Pregoner
[1] Philippine Christian University, Manila, Metro Manila, Philippines
[2] Philippine Christian University, Manila, Metro Manila, Philippines

This essay presents an intriguing but underdeveloped discussion on qualitative hypotheses (QHs). While the topic is timely and relevant in light of increased interest in preregistration within qualitative research, the manuscript lacks the analytical sharpness expected from a robust meta-methodological contribution. The central concept—QHs as a means to disclose expectations without testing—has merit, yet it is delivered with a narrative tone that leans heavily on anecdotal reflection rather than critical argumentation. The historical account, while personally honest, occupies disproportionate space and weakens the conceptual depth. Furthermore, the treatment of "functions" and "limitations" often drifts into speculative territory, lacking rigorous engagement with qualitative epistemologies. The manuscript would benefit greatly from clearer theoretical grounding, a more critical stance on when QHs could mislead rather than clarify, and a sharper distinction between QHs and other reflexive tools like positionality statements. Ultimately, this work gestures at an important idea but needs greater conceptual discipline and argumentative precision to meaningfully advance the discussion.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?

Partly

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Partly

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Research methodologies

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.