

Validity Issues in Qualitative Research

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Introduction

This paper presents in brief one aspect of qualitative research, validity. Stakeholders would often ask, "How will we know that the conclusions are right (valid)? Why should we believe the data collected by a field worker? In qualitative research, validity refers to the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, interpretation or other sort of account," (Maxwell, 1996, p. 87), a kind of representation. There is no gold standard to which we can compare our accounts to see if they are valid in qualitative research (Putnam, 1990). "Statistical package are used to test validity and reliability of coding in quantitative research paradigms," (Amare, 1998, p. 1-14; Amare, 2004, p. 41-62). In qualitative research the issue of validity is viewed in terms of validity threats: *a way you might be wrong*. These threats could be alternative explanations or rival hypotheses (Maxell, 1996, p. 88). In quantitative research validity threats are a priori "controlled" in the research design. These controls would be statistical control of extraneous variables, randomized sampling and assignment, the use of tests of statistical significance. Qualitative research has no benefit of these techniques and relies on by trying to rule out validity threats, after the research has begun; using evidence collected during the research itself to make these alternative hypotheses implausible (Stake, 1995, p. 107). You should often ask "did I get it right? (ibid). Maxwell (1996, p. 89-90) has identified three major areas of threats in qualitative research. These are description, interpretation and theory.

Description: The main threat to valid description, in the sense of describing what you saw and heard, is the inaccuracy or incompleteness of the data. The audio or video recording of observations and interviews, and verbatim transcription of these recordings, largely solves this problem; if you are not doing this, it poses a potentially serious threat to the validity of your study. If

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your description of what you were observing, or of the interview you conducted, is invalid, then any interpretations or conclusions you draw from these descriptions are questionable. For this reason, you should always record and transcribe interviews unless there is a strong reason not to. If you do not videotape, you need to make your observational notes as detailed, concrete, and chronological as possible.

Interpretation: The main threat to valid interpretation is imposing one's own framework or meaning, rather than understanding the perspective of the people studied and the meanings they attach to their words and actions. There are several ways that this happens: not listening for the participants' meanings; not being aware of and bracketing your own framework and assumptions; asking leading, closed, or short-answer questions that don't give participants the opportunity to reveal their own perspective. The most important check on such validity threats is to seriously and systematically attempt to learn how the participants in your study make sense of what's going on, rather than pigeonholing their words and actions in your own framework.

Theory: The most serious threat to the theoretical validity of an account is not collecting or paying attention to discrepant data, or not considering alternative explanations or understandings of the phenomena you are studying. The key problem is the establishment of vague and abstract propositions through anecdotal evidence, without considering of what could disprove these propositions.

Two Specific Validity Threats: Bias and Reactivity

It is argued that qualitative researchers generally deal with validity threats as particular events or processes that could lead to invalid conclusions, rather than as generic variables that need to be controlled. It clearly would be impossible to list all, or even the most important, validity threats to the conclusions of a qualitative study.

Researcher Bias: Two important threats to the validity of qualitative conclusions are the selection of data that fit the researcher's existing theory or preconceptions and the selection of data that "stand out" to the researcher. However, it is clearly impossible to deal with these problems by eliminating the researcher's theories, preconceptions, or values. This impossibility is one aspect of what has been called the inherent reflexivity of qualitative research. Nor is it usually appropriate to try to standardize the researcher to achieve reliability; qualitative research is not primarily concerned with eliminating variance between researchers in the values and expectations they bring to the study, but with understanding how a particular researcher's values influence the conduct and conclusions of the study. Explaining your possible biases and how you will deal with these is a key task of your research activity. Validity in qualitative research is not the result of indifference, but of integrity.

Reactivity: The influence of the research on the setting or individuals studied, a problem generally known as reactivity, is a second problem that is often raised about qualitative studies. The approach to reactivity of most quantitative research, of trying to control for the effect of the researcher, is appropriate to a variance theory perspective, in which the goal is to prevent researcher variability from being an unwanted cause of variability in the outcome variables. However, eliminating the actual influence of the researcher is impossible, and the goal in a qualitative study is not to eliminate this influence but to understand it and to use it productively.

Four attempts to reduce validity threats are effort, honesty, triangulation and ethics.

Effort: Effort demands commitment and joy in the research. Researchers must know what they are looking for and search for evidence (written, oral or reordered), which is relevant to their research or data questions. They must spend extensive time in the field in trying to understand the problem. Searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases is very helpful. Identifying and analyzing discrepant data and negative case is a key part of the attempt to falsify a proposed conclusion. Instances that cannot be

accounted for by a particular interpretation or explanation can point up important defects in that account. However, there are times when an apparently discrepant instance is not persuasive, as when the interpretation of the discrepant data is itself in doubt.

Honesty: Researchers and data collectors must be honest in the use of authentic evidence with a minimum of personal bias. In-authenticity of data can arise out of dishonesty that may occur due to laziness, inconvenience or any other motivation. Without honesty, the data and research can mislead policy and practice.

Triangulation: The use of several sources of evidence can help validate the trustworthiness of information. Triangulation can bridge gaps in evidence, in addition to its worthiness to test convergence of information. Thus the different sources of evidence (documents, records, reports, interviews and discussions) can be used to check whether or not emerging evidence is converging or diverging. Additional checks are helpful if data appear to diverge.

Ethics: This is a question of how to protect others (including research participants) from possible risks that arise from communication with the researcher; it also concerns the researcher's general behavior of understanding and respecting cultural values and rituals of the community. In addition to being knowledgeable about the community, data collectors need not be arrogant. Self-humility and respect of those involved in sharing their knowledge with you is not only important but also mandatory. Note that they are doing favor for you and do not have any obligation to talk what they know.

Through empathetic relationship they must be ensured of security and safety from risks that arise from the knowledge they share with you. You must guarantee that you will use the information for nothing other than for understanding the research issue. Anonymity of sources and proper preservation of the information from leaks are some of the sure ways for gaining confidence of research participants.

Piloting: In quantitative research piloting helps to improve instruments and practices by amending or elimination. Uncoupling data collectors are also eliminated in the testing process.

Piloting in qualitative research helps to anticipate threats and problems in advance and reduce being shocked or surprised in the field. How to interview is an art that demands some expertness to facilitate a conducive environment for free discussion. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to create a free environment for a free discussion. If research participants do not feel free, they will give you what you want and not what you need. We need to practise interviewing before we are engaged in the actual fieldwork. Encountered problems and emerging issues can then be deliberated together by the research team before deployment in the fieldwork.

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