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Identifying Validity in Qualitative Research

A Literature Review

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### Abstract

This paper explores multiple articles relating to qualitative research. Qualitative research has seen several transformation that aim to support contributions for this research development. As research, using a qualitative methodology rises to prevalence, this paper explores industry and academia use of this methodology. The paper review research based in the field of healthcare and social work. After analysis, the review of literature shows that a majority qualitative research are within the field healthcare (Johnson, 1999). The research conducted embraces a diverse collection of approaches to inquiry intended to generate knowledge actually grounded in human experience. The literature review also addressed “rigor” as a standard for valid research, and the impending presumption for flexibility as called for by pundits against qualitative research paradigm. It was argued that this call for rigidity could threaten the innovativeness and hence the meaning and quality of a qualitative research. The author then review and describe the concept of validity to a qualitative research paradigm and how it is applied as discussed by Creswell (2013). Creswell discusses five approach, narrative, Phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study, which we will review through the paper.

*Key words:* qualitative design, methodology, case studies, analysis of data

## Reviewing Qualitative Research

### Literature Review

The propagation of qualitative research in the areas of academia has gained prominence over the past decades. Creswell (2013) found that researchers in various fields including medical and health services are proponents of this research design in most of their research conducted.

In reviewing several literature on the subject of qualitative studies, authors who may have a bias to of various discipline such as Swanson and Holson (2010), Creswell (2013), and Cooper and Schindler (2014) all agreed to some extent of the importance of this research paradigm for all factors of research within industry and academia.

### **Identifying Quality in Qualitative Research**

The notion of validity in qualitative research has been “championed, translated, exciled, redeemed, and surpassed” (Emden & Sandelowski, 1998, p. 207). Whereas it can be established that rigor is essential to any scientific endeavor to ensure validity, what this is called and how to ensure it is not so clear. How can all of the nuances of qualitative inquiry be subject to evaluation that is both reflective of the assumptions of the perspective and at the same time easily understood within the broader scientific community? Numerous terms have been suggested as those working within the interpretive perspective have struggled to articulate validity criteria in qualitative research. Truth value, credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), trustworthiness (Eisner, 1991), authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), and goodness (Emden & Sandelowski, 1998;

Marshall, 1990) have all been proposed as more suitable criteria to judge the quality of qualitative research. Yet none have been overwhelmingly supported. Kahn (1993) discussed the implications of idiosyncratic terminology associated with validity in qualitative research and emphasized that language should not obscure understanding. As the dialogue swirls around in the literature, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) translated criteria remain the gold standard. The problem with this is that investigators rely on the theoretical assurance of validity at the expense of the practical application. Procedural charade and pseudoscience abound. Verification of a personally held belief or theory through a successful demonstration of method does not constitute science (Johnson, 1999). Validity claims often appear as standardized language from methods books without evidence that the investigator thought through the application of strategies in a specific study (Maxwell, 1992). Investigators and research consumers are equally at a disadvantage.

### **Validity Issues with Qualitative Research**

This increase of qualitative research importance in the above communities endured great debate regarding “epistemological, philosophical, and methodological issues” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1375), but initially, this was not the case as “intellectual tension developed with regard to the emancipation from the quantitative epistemological perspective while still competing within a quantitatively dominated research paradigm” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1379). Phillips (1987) also supported this idea previously, in his article titled *Validity in qualitative research* states, that the debate between “qualitative purism and pluralism as well as between critical realism,

relativism, and postmodernism exposed the opposing dangers of methodological rigidity and methodological anarchy” (p.52).

Proponents against the rigidity qualitative research argue that, there are some degree of difficulty to establish validity criteria in qualitative research. Whereas Maxwell (1990) suggests that certainty, using a qualitative methodology in scientific inquiry is certainly ineffective. Altheide and Johnson (1994) within their article titled *Criteria for assessing interpretive validity in qualitative research*, states that the need for validity standards in qualitative research is definitely a challenge because of the stipulation to integrate rigor and subjectivity into the research process. Additionally as outlined by Creswell (2013) a variation of qualitative methods promote different evaluative criteria for each type.

As shown below, Creswell (2013) suggested five approaches to qualitative research, and in each formation, the research takes on a different role or acquire a different technique to get the job accomplished:

**Narrative researchers.** This method collect stories, documents, and group conversations about the lived and told experiences of one or two individuals. They record the stories using interview, observation, documents and images, then report the experiences, and chronologically order the meaning of those experiences. (p. 70-72)

**Phenomenology.** This method is a way to study an idea or concept that holds a common meaning for a small group (3-15) of individuals. The approach centers on lived experiences of a particular phenomenon, such as grief, and guides researchers to distill individual experiences to an essential concept. (p.78)

**Grounded theory.** This method seeks to generate or discover a theory—a general explanation—for a social process, action or interaction shaped by the views of participants (p. 83). One key factor in grounded theory is that it does not come “off the shelf” but is “grounded” from data collected from a large sample. (p.87)

**Ethnography.** This method is a qualitative research design in which the unit of analysis is typically greater than 20 participants and focuses on an “entire culture-sharing group.” The “research describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language” of the group. (p.96)

**Case study.** This method of research, defined as the “the study of a case within a real-life contemporary context or setting” Creswell takes the perspective that such research “is a methodology: a type of design in qualitative research that may be an object of study, as well as a product of inquiry. (p.97)

How then, can quality in qualitative research be discerned within such an ambiguous and intangible framework? What distinguishes science from pseudoscience? (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p.485).

### **Grounding Qualitative versus Quantitative Research Paradigm**

Qualitative research has seen several transformations that aim to support contributions for this research development. The concept of validity to a qualitative research paradigm was then applied from “reliability and validity standards of quantitative or experimental research based on a positivistic philosophy” (LeCompte & Goetz, 1984, p.34). In this context, the traditional idea surrounding reliability and validity can be viewed to be appropriate and valid, where point of reference by which the quality

of all research could be judged (Popay, Rogers, & Williams, 1998). In referring to both measures, the reliability of a research is the stability of findings, whereas validity represented the truthfulness of findings (Altheide & Johnson, 1994).

Popay, Rogers, & Williams (1998), argues that these terms are incompatible to the tenets of qualitative research and further dialogue ensued to ensure that a more aligned translation be given to researchers. These arguments lead Lincoln and Guba (1985) to provide a translated revelation of terms used in their research. The research community saw a translation of terminology, where Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified, a) internal validity to credibility, b) external validity to transferability, c) reliability to dependability, and d) objectivity to confirmability. (p.105) For these translations to be conclusive, the resulting factors need to be answered where, the author need to answer what does these new terminologies mean, how can these terminologies be assured for consistency and who will confirm these results when the research is done.

### **Academic Rigor and Creativity in Qualitative Research**

One of the academic research terminology drummed into the requirements of research is “academic rigor” (Maxwell, 1992). The application of the methods prescribed by Creswell (2014) of Narrative Research, Phenomenology, Grounded Theory, Ethnography and Case Study, all appears to give credibility and legitimacy to the validity of qualitative research; it is argued however, that this is done so at the expense of creativity within the body of the research itself. Janesick (1994) this method results in an overemphasis resulting in a “marginalization of the creativity of the research itself” (p. 215).

Emden and Sandelowski (1998) posited that due to the impending dogmatism for flexibility, the call for rigidity and other factors suitable for a quantitative design, the qualitative research could threaten by a reduction in artfulness, and sensitivity to meaning, which embolden and forms the meaning quality of a qualitative research.

To ensure that validity exists by the systematic application of method now shows another impending dilemma in qualitative research. That is, procedures will not necessarily produce sound data or credible conclusions and as Maxwell (1992) remarked, “Validity is not an inherent property of a particular method, but pertains to the data, accounts, or conclusions reached by using that method in a particular context for a particular purpose” (p. 284). Maxwell (1996) continues to state that the evidence to support validity may not be declaration of adherence, but in fact may an impediment to the development of a good qualitative research.

Proponents against qualitative research criticize the quality produced by a qualitative research design saying it is biased and anecdotal and lack rigor. However, in her paper titled “*Presenting and evaluating qualitative research*” Anderson (2010) supports the idea that if the research is carried out appropriately it is balanced, valid, credible and rigorous. For these qualities to evident Anderson (2010) suggests that there need to assessments activities that supports evidence. For example, validity is associated with a quantitative variety of research, but recently these concepts is now evident in qualitative research as well.

When the reviewer examine the data, he is expected to observe objectivity and credibility of the research in question. Writers have searched for and found qualitative

equivalents that parallel traditional quantitative approach, the first being validation, “validity relates to the honesty and genuineness of the research data, while reliability relates to the reproducibility and stability of the data” (Creswell, 2013 p. 202) in the traditional sense. Another factor under consideration to prove the rigor of the research is triangulation. Triangulation is using two or more methods to study the same phenomenon. Contradictory evidence, often known as deviant cases, is thoroughly reviewed and examined by the researcher during the analysis phase, and then an account must be given to ensure that researcher bias does not affect with or alter their perception of the data and any insights offered (Anderson, 2010). Additionally, respondent validation is another area to consider. This validation technique allows selected participants to analyze the data then provide extensive feedback on the researchers' interpretations of responses given, then they provide to the researcher additional feedback, in this way both parties can check for inconsistencies, challenges the researchers' assumptions, and provides them with the opportunity to conduct further analysis on the data.

According to research done by Anderson (2010), it is evident that, the research should be able to utilize the most appropriate methods investigation into a research topic. For the researcher conducting the research, it is imperative to understand that qualitative research should be selective, it is thereby not suited for every research question, and researchers need to think carefully about their objectives (Creswell, Plano, 2006).

The selection of a qualitative research versus another methodology is solely based on the premise of the question that the researcher seeks to answer such as, what phenomenon do the research wish to study?

In the field of healthcare, authors such as Emden and Sandelowski (1998), Beech (1999), Giacomini and Cook (2000), Tong, Flemming, McInnes, Oliver, and Craig (2012) agreed with the description of methodologic way to synthesize qualitative research. They argued that to conduct a research beginning within the field of healthcare, but more importantly, recognize that a provision of evidence-based healthcare and health policy requires a range of evidence beyond that provided by the 'rationalist' model of systematic reviewing of quantitative research. These researchers then argues that qualitative research aims to provide an in-depth understanding into human behavior, emotion, attitudes and experiences.

### **Qualitative Research Utilization**

Estabrooks's (2001) classification of research utilization as instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic is a useful frame of reference to examine the various meanings of use and their implications for understanding, demonstrating, and enhancing utility in qualitative research. Instrumental utilization is the concrete application to practice of research findings that have been translated into material forms, such as clinical guidelines, care standards, appraisal tools, pathways, intervention protocols, or algorithms. These forms are then put into practice and evaluated with specific groups of patients in specific practice settings to achieve specific outcomes. In instrumental utilization, the utilization of findings is discernible to others and to the users themselves. By virtue of its emphasis on the visible, tangible, material, and measurable, instrumental utilization is the ultimate goal of empirical/analytical research (which may include qualitative and quantitative inquiry) and of the evidence-based practice paradigm that favors this form of research. Symbolic utilization is less visible and concrete, as it entails

no change per se but, rather, the use of research findings as a persuasive or political tool to legitimate a position or practice. Although its actionability resides largely in talk, symbolic utilization may be a precursor to instrumental utilization as a change in practice may ultimately result from this form of use. Conceptual utilization is the least tangible—and therefore the most dubious example of research utilization—as it entails no observable action at all but, rather, a change in the way users think about problems, persons, or events.

Giacomini and Cook (2000) described qualitative research findings as useful in the ways either a window reveals or a mirror reflects. For individuals with no personal experience of a target event, qualitative research findings offer a window through which to view aspects of life that would have remained unknown.

### **Qualitative Research in Healthcare**

The extant literature shows a prevalence of research in the field of healthcare and social work. This research decides to review both.

As research using a qualitative methodology rises, the review of literature shows that a majority of these research are within the area healthcare (Johnson, 1999). The research conducted embraces a diverse collection of approaches to inquiry intended to generate knowledge actually grounded in human experience. Johnson (1999) confirmed that a plethora of qualitative health studies is now accessible ranging from nursing, human health, general medicine and consumers of health research. The topics covered during the review, agree with previous authors on the topic (Emden and Sandelowski, 1998, Beech, 1999, Giacomini and Cook, 2000, Tong, Flemming, McInnes, Oliver, and Craig, 2012). The explosive growth of qualitative studies has affected all industries

which include conferences, academic literature, institutions and business who are now devoted to provide the sale of qualitative literature to disseminate the methods and expertise to body of researchers.

### **Qualitative research In Social Work**

Another area that is seeing the prevalent use of qualitative methodology is within the field of social work. Qualitative research methodology is able, harness and explore the lived experience of the participant, which is unlike a quantitative research. To harness the conversations that ensue by the methodology, while attempting to benefit from opportunities to construct understanding from the perspective of the informant, also mark an inherently subjective endeavor, therefore the researcher is the instrument for analysis across all phases of a qualitative research project (Starks and Trinidad, 2007). The subjective nature of this methodology necessitates the unavoidable communication of assumptions, values, interests, emotions and theories within and across the study being conducted. Inadvertently, this subjectivity will also influence how data are gathered, interpreted, and presented.

Within the body of social work, some researchers in an attempt to mitigate the potential toxic effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project employ bracketing. However, given the close connection between the researcher and the topic being researched during the process of qualitative research, bracketing is one method to protect the researcher from the cumulative effects of examining what may be emotionally challenging material. A lengthy research endeavor on an emotionally challenging topic can infuse the researcher

with its inherent challenges, render continuing research an arduous endeavor and, in turn, skew the results and interpretations.

### **Summary**

We begin by delineating the historical and philosophical foundations of qualitative research, which gave a full perspective on the current issues and inconsistencies surrounding this methodology. Following an examination of the various types of qualitative endeavors, a presentation of the analysis to be undertaken to prove validity, rigor and reliability was given (Creswell, 2013 p. 202-204). The review of the literature highlighted the tensions that have arisen over the past decade concerning the rise and integration of this methodology. A conceptual framework review and discussion by way of healthcare and social constructs in both fields was given, and a presentation of issues and resolutions were reviewed and is presented along with research examples that address various types of literature review across the research trajectory. Lastly, a discussion on the benefit from bracketing as it is brought into the discussion to mitigate the potential harmful effects on the research underway.

### **Conclusion**

Although time consuming to conduct, qualitative research tends to offer forth a wealth of varied information on a small case or set of cases over a broad set of data. The breadth Becker refers to means being open to the multiple causes of every event. Well done qualitative research is limited in its scope, but very rich in depth. It can help us see how many different causes and actions lead to specific outcomes.

Likewise, a qualitative approach can point out the limitations of our own theories and categories. Allowing the research questions to adjust with new information, what Becker calls precision, means that we can be more sure we're actually getting at what we say we're getting at. Qualitative researchers are also often acutely aware of how their own preconceptions and presence may affect a situation. This attention can, I think, lead to better research that helps clarify our vision.

### **Recommendation**

The actual research part of a qualitative study usually relies on a combination of participant observation, interviews, and historical research. The literature recommends a synthesis of findings from multiple qualitative studies can provide a range and depth of meanings, experiences, and perspectives of participants across an industry perspective. Syntheses of qualitative research can pull together data across different contexts, generate new theoretical or conceptual models, identify research gaps, inform the development of primary studies, and provide evidence for the development, implementation and evaluation of health interventions. The synthesis, or "bringing together" of the findings of primary qualitative studies is emerging as an important source of evidence for healthcare and policy. Many aspects of the methods for synthesizing qualitative research are in the early stages of development.

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