

Qualitative Research Assessment Tool

Despite their more varied nature, qualitative research findings can be evaluated for accuracy through a variety of means. Two concepts -- reliability and validity -- are often viewed as the primary standards for judging research findings. Generally, reliability, or the consistency and stability of a research instrument, is often an indicator of validity, or the accuracy and truthfulness of research findings. Since quantitative studies are frequently based upon standardized instruments that are administered to randomly selected sample populations, issues of reliability and validity can be assessed in a relatively forthright manner. In contrast, qualitative studies are usually not based upon standardized instruments and often utilize smaller, nonrandom samples. Hence, assessing the accuracy of qualitative findings is less straightforward. Since there is little consensus as to how to critically evaluate qualitative research, three possible approaches are presented here.

I. Compared to other qualitative studies that may utilize survey instruments or multiple interviewers, ethnographies are somewhat unique since the data are often collected and analyzed by a single person – the ethnographer. Altheide and Johnson (1994) suggest that ethnographies can be evaluated by looking for a common series of issues, problems, or questions that ethnographers often confront while conducting fieldwork, such as the following:

1. **Entrée.** How does the ethnographer gain access to an organization, setting, or a group of individuals?
2. **Self-presentation.** What does the ethnographer tell the setting members about him or herself, and how is it revealed?
3. **Trust and rapport.** How does the ethnographer develop a trusting relationship with members?
4. **The ethnographer's role.** What is the ethnographer's role in the setting – beyond collecting data – and how does he or she fit into the setting?
5. **Mistakes, misconceptions, surprises.** What are some of the unexpected events that occur during fieldwork?
6. **Types and varieties of data.** What are the various types of data collected by the ethnographer, such as field notes, journals, or interview transcripts?
7. **Data collection and data recording.** What are some of the field methods employed, such as participant observation or direct observation?
8. **Data coding and data organization.** What tools or approaches are used to organize the data, such as qualitative software?

9. **Data demonstration and analytic use.** How are collected data, such as field notes or quotes, deployed in the narrative report?

10. **Narrative report.** How is the final narrative report structured?

According to this perspective, the more candidly the ethnographer discusses these issues, the more credible will be the ethnographer's findings. Additionally, since other types of qualitative studies often face similar questions and issues during data collection, these ten points can also serve as a general guide for assessing nonethnographic, qualitative research. Typically, a reader may find these points more extensively discussed in the methodology or appendix sections of most qualitative reports.

II. While readers of qualitative research need to know how to evaluate qualitative findings, it is also important to understand that methods of enhancing research validity can be built into a study. Kuzel and Like (1991) summarize four techniques that researchers can utilize during data collection and may increase the validity or trustworthiness of research findings. Additionally, a critical reader of a qualitative study can also look for the following characteristics in a final report, article, or book:

1. Member checking. During the interview, member checking consists of the researcher restating, summarizing, or paraphrasing the information received from a respondent to ensure that what was heard or written down is in fact correct. Following data collection, member checking consists of reporting back preliminary findings to respondents or participants, asking for critical commentary on the findings, and potentially incorporating these critiques into the findings. Both forms of member checking may add accuracy and richness to a final report.

2. Disconfirming Evidence. This is a procedure whereby a researcher actively seeks accounts from other respondents that differ from the main or consensus accounts in critical ways. The inclusion of complementary and conflicting data may strengthen the validity of the data collected. If the researcher cannot uncover disconfirming evidence, then the findings may be relatively stronger and more convincing.

3. Triangulation. Triangulation is an approach that utilizes multiple data sources (e.g. archival, interview, video), multiple informants (e.g., various key informants), and multiple methods (e.g., participant observation, focus groups), in order to confirm or validate research findings. A primary goal of triangulation is to gather multiple perspectives so as to gain a more complete understanding of phenomena.

4. Thick Description. Thick description refers to a detailed description of a phenomenon that includes the researcher's interpretation in addition to the observed context and processes. It may also include providing a thorough

accounting of the methods and procedures followed during and after data collection.

III. Guba and Lincoln (1981) propose four criteria for evaluating qualitative findings and enhancing trustworthiness. While each criterion has an analogous quantitative criterion, the list is believed to better reflect the assumptions and epistemology underlying qualitative research. These criteria can be both incorporated into a research design and be used to assess qualitative findings:

1. **Credibility.** This criterion is an assessment of the believability or credibility of the research findings from the perspective of the members or study participants. The inclusion of member checking into the findings, that is, gaining feedback on results from the participants, is one method of increasing credibility. Credibility is analogous to internal validity, that is, the approximate truth about casual relationships, or the impact of one variable on another.
2. **Transferability.** Refers to the degree that findings can be transferred or generalized to other settings, contexts, or populations. A qualitative researcher can enhance transferability by detailing the research methods, contexts, and assumptions underlying the study. Transferability is analogous to external validity, that is, the extent to which findings can be generalized.
3. **Dependability.** Pertains to the importance of the researcher accounting for or describing the changing contexts and circumstances that are fundamental to qualitative research. Dependability may be enhanced by altering the research design as new findings emerge during data collection. Dependability is analogous to reliability, that is, the consistency of observing the same finding under similar circumstances.
4. **Confirmability.** Refers to the extent that the research findings can be confirmed or corroborated by others. Strategies for enhancing confirmability include searching for negative cases that run contrary to most findings, and conducting a data audit to pinpoint potential areas of bias or distortion. Confirmability is analogous to objectivity, that is, the extent to which a researcher is aware of or accounts for individual subjectivity or bias.

Sources:

Altheide, D., and Johnson, J. (1994). Criteria for assessing interpretive validity in qualitative research. In N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds.) Handbook of Qualitative Research, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 485-499.

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Kuzel, A.J., and Like, R.C. (1991). Standards of trustworthiness for qualitative studies in primary care. In P.G. Norton, M. Stewart, F. Tudiver, M.J. Bass, and E.V. Dunn (eds) Primary Care Research: Traditional and Innovative Approaches. Newbury Park, California: Sage, 138-158.