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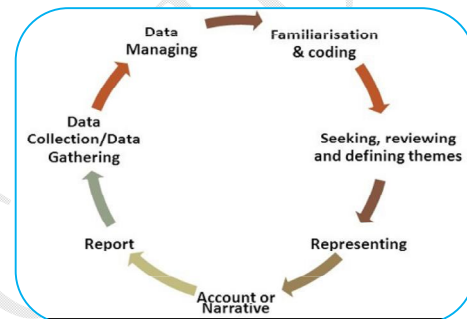


ISSUES OF VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT:

Validity and reliability are key aspects of all research. Qualitative research is frequently criticised for lacking scientific rigour with poor justification of the methods adopted, lack of transparency in the analytical procedures and the findings being merely a collection of personal opinions subject to researcher bias. There are ongoing debates about whether terms such as validity and reliability are appropriate to evaluate qualitative research. It is a fact that quantitative research is supported by the positivist or scientific paradigm that regards the world as made up of observable, measurable facts while Qualitative research, on the other hand, produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification. On the basis of the constructivist paradigm, it is a naturalistic inquiry that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings in which the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest. Therefore, reliability and validity particularly from a qualitative point of view, have to be redefined in order to reflect the multiple ways of establishing truth.



KEYWORDS: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, trustworthiness.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research, broadly defined, means "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990,) and instead, the kind of research that produces findings arrived from real-world settings where the "phenomenon of interest unfold naturally" (Patton, 2001,). Unlike quantitative researchers who

seek causal determination, prediction, and generalization of findings, qualitative researchers seek instead illumination, understanding, and extrapolation to similar situations (Hoepfl, 1997). Qualitative research assumes that there are multiple realities-that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception. It is a highly subjective phenomenon in need of interpreting rather than measuring, Beliefs rather than facts form the basis of perception,

Merriam (1988).

While the credibility in quantitative research depends on instrument construction, in qualitative research, "the researcher is the instrument" (Patton, 2001). For example, while the terms Reliability and Validity are essential criterion for quality in quantitative paradigms, in qualitative paradigms the terms Credibility, Neutrality or Confirmability, Consistency or Dependability and Applicability or Transferability are to be the essential criteria for quality

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To be more specific with the term of reliability in qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985,) use “dependability”, in qualitative research which closely corresponds to the notion of “reliability” in quantitative research. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the trustworthiness of a research study is the central aspect of the issues that are conventionally called validity and reliability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refined the concept of trustworthiness by introducing the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to parallel the conventional quantitative assessment criteria of validity and reliability

- a) credibility (in preference to internal validity);
- b) transferability (in preference to external validity/generalisability);
- c) dependability (in preference to reliability);
- d) confirmability (in preference to objectivity)

Credibility - Often called internal validity, refers to the believability and trustworthiness of the findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that research results be scrutinized according to three basic questions: (a) Do the conclusions make sense? (b) Do the conclusions adequately describe research participants’ perspectives? and (c) Do conclusions authentically represent the phenomena under study? This depends more on the richness of the data gathered than on the quantity of data. The participants of the study are the only ones that decide if the results actually reflect the phenomena being studied and therefore, it is important that participants feel the findings are credible and accurate.

Consultation with an expert in the field was utilized as an alternate data source. Triangulation is a commonly used method for verifying accuracy that involves cross-checking information from multiple perspectives. Triangulation may be the best-known criterion for qualitative researchers. Triangulation consists of the interrelationship between the information obtained from the data that was collected from different sources to increase the understanding of the study in question, thus improving the reliability of the results. There are four types of triangulation as introduced by Denzin (1970), which can also be used in conjunction with each other:

1. Data triangulation – using different sources of data, e.g. from existing research
2. Methodological triangulation – using more than one method, e.g. mixed methods approach, however with focus on qualitative methods
3. Investigator triangulation – using more than one researcher adds to the credibility of a study in order to mitigate the researcher’s influence
4. Theoretical triangulation – using more than one theory as conceptual framework

Transferability - Often called external validity, refers to the degree that the findings of the research can be transferred to other contexts by the readers. Similar to the concept of external validity in quantitative studies, transferability seeks to determine if the results relate to other contexts and can be transferred to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This means that the results are generalizable and can be applied to other similar settings, populations, situations and so forth. Researchers should thoroughly describe the context of the research to assist the reader in being able to generalize the findings and apply them appropriately. According to Bitsch (2005), the “researcher facilitates the transferability judgment by a potential user through ‘thick description’ and purposeful sampling.”

Dependability - Dependability is important to trustworthiness because it establishes the research study’s findings as consistent and repeatable. Researchers aim to verify that their findings are consistent with the raw data they collected. They want to make sure that if some other researchers were to look over the data, they would arrive at similar findings, interpretations, and conclusions about the data. This is important to make sure that there was not anything missed in the research study, or

that the researcher was not sloppy or misguided in his or her final report. Otherwise known as reliability, refers to the consistency with which the results could be repeated and result in similar findings. The dependability of the findings for other researchers who may want to replicate the study. Similar to the concept of reliability in quantitative research, also lends legitimacy to the research method. Because the nature of qualitative research often results in an ever changing research setting and changing contexts, it is important that researcher document all aspects of any changes or unexpected occurrences to further explain the findings. Dependability is established using an audit trail, a code-recode strategy, stepwise replication, triangulation and peer examination or iterator comparisons (Ary et al., 2010; Chilisa & Preece, 2005; Krefting, 1991; Schwandt et al., 2007).

A major technique for assessing dependability is the dependability audit in which an independent auditor reviews the activities of the researcher (as recorded in an audit trail in field notes, archives, and reports) to see how well the techniques for meeting the credibility and transferability standards have been followed. If the researcher does not maintain any kind of audit trail, the dependability cannot be assessed and dependability and trustworthiness of the study are diminished.

Lincoln and Guba stress the close ties between credibility and dependability, arguing that, in practice, a demonstration of the former goes some distance in ensuring the latter. This may be achieved through the use of "overlapping methods", such as the focus group and individual interview.

Confirmability -Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results of an inquiry could be confirmed or corroborated by other researchers (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). A measure of the objectivity used in evaluating the results, describes how well the research findings are supported by the actual data collected when examined by other researchers. Researchers bring their own unique perspectives to the research process and data interpretation can be somewhat subjective in qualitative research. If findings are corroborated or confirmed by others who examine the data, then no inappropriate biases impacted the data analysis. Confirmability assumes that the findings are reflective of the participants' perspectives as evidenced in the data, rather than being a reflection of my own perceptions or bias. 5

CONCLUSION:

In this paper I have tried to explain the issues related to validity and reliability in qualitative paradigm, so that the reader can easily grasp the concepts. Despite various measures to enhance or ensure quality of qualitative studies, some researchers opined from a purist ontological and epistemological angle that qualitative research is not a unified, it is diverse field hence any attempt to synthesize or appraise different studies under one system is impossible and conceptually wrong. However, there is no universally accepted terminology and criteria used to evaluate qualitative research.

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