CHAPTER 3

An Exploration of Quality in Qualitative Research

Are "Reliability" and "Validity" Relevant?

Elizabeth Merrick

For some, considerations of qualitative research prompt thoughts of relativism and loosely established truths. A charge is often made that there is no way to establish the validity or truth value of scientific claims or observations in qualitative work (Jessor, 1996). Indeed, what most qualitative researchers consider strengths—a reliance on the human instrument and an acknowledgment that many truths exist—others may see as major threats or weaknesses. With such relativism, it becomes essential to acknowledge the human element involved and to consider, as part of the method, the strengths and limitations of the personal instrument. The latter is a major contribution of qualitative methods: not only to acknowledge the researcher's influence/involvement in making meaning but also to attempt to delineate steps or checks that bound, or at least make visible, this influence. The question remains, How shall we judge the quality of the research process and product?

My approach to the issues involved is informed by my experience as a qualitative researcher and as a consumer of qualitative research. Essentially, I am concerned with fairly practical questions: How do I conduct "good" qualitative research? How do I communicate my findings to others? and How do I evaluate others' work? I take up these questions first through an exploration of reliability and validity. Then I address three areas considered essential to evaluations of quality. I have chosen the first two—trustworthiness and reflexivity—because of the consensus about these as hallmarks of quality work, and the third—representation—because it seems to be a crucial, next issue in the field.

It is important to note at the start that whether the terms *reliability* and *validity* belong in considerations of qualitative research is debatable. (For

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examples of divergent views, see Becker [1996], Lather [1993], and Wolcott, [1990].) After all, these criteria have traditionally been used to assess the quality of quantitative research. Traditionally, *reliability* is described as the extent to which a research endeavor and findings can be replicated; *validity* refers to the extent to which findings can be considered true (Stiles, 1993).

As these terms have been defined and used in discussions of quantitative work, they are not truly appropriate for discussing qualitative research. Nevertheless, I choose to begin my consideration of quality in qualitative research with an exploration of these terms partly because most psychologists are familiar with, and have been trained to evaluate, research using these criteria. In addition, my choice is rooted in the belief that "reliability" and "validity" have been appropriated by quantitative researchers for too long. My hope, in a vein similar to Lather (1993), is that qualitative researchers may reclaim and redefine the terms needed to discuss qualitative work. Believing that the research we conduct is both reliable and valid, I discuss it as such. Thoughtful use of these terms—not as a defense or an appeal to the positivist paradigm— creates space to consider what is important in qualitative research endeavors.

Acknowledging the many divergent opinions about evaluation criteria for qualitative research, I rely heavily on Denzin and Lincoln (1994) to summarize four positions:

1. The *positivist position* argues that one set of criteria should be applied to all scientific research. These criteria involve assessing internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity.

2. The *postpositivist position* asserts that a set of criteria unique to qualitative research should be developed. Although researchers disagree considerably about what these criteria should be, they do agree that these should be different from those of quantitative research. In the constructivist view, internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity translate into trustworthiness and authenticity.

3. The *postmodernist position* states that no criteria exist for judging the products of qualitative research. "The very idea of assessing qualitative research is antithetical to the nature of this research and the world it attempts to study" (p. 480).

4. The *poststructuralist position* asserts that an entirely new set of criteria, divorced from positivist and postpositivist traditions, needs to be constructed. This set would flow from the qualitative project itself and might include subjectivity, emotionality, feeling, and other antifoundational factors (pp. 479-480).

In the summary of issues that follows, my treatment can be located within the postpositivist position. The task, then, is to consider and develop criteria for assessing "quality" in qualitative research, redefining reliability and validity in the process. To introduce several central issues and as a way of grounding this discussion with attention to concerns of traditional evaluation, I present a summary of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) delineation of "parallel criteria." This

perspective, from naturalistic inquiry, may be situated within the postpositivist/ constructivist position described above. Lincoln and Guba's ideas on evaluation criteria have subsequently changed (see Lincoln, 1995, for a summary of the evolution of her thought); however, these original criteria may be considered foundational. Toward a goal of "trustworthiness," Lincoln and Guba developed four criteria that paralleled those of quantitative methods. These parallel criteria are presented and briefly discussed.

The concept of *internal validity* was paralleled by *credibility*. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed several techniques to increase the likelihood that credible findings and interpretations will be produced. These include (a) *prolonged engagement*—investing sufficient time for persistent observation; (b) *triangulation*—checking the accuracy of specific items of data by using different sources; (c) *peer debriefing*—engaging with others about what one is finding and about the research process; (d) *negative case analysis*—a process of revising hypotheses in the light of what is found; and (e) *referential adequacy*— setting aside data to be archived and then compared with findings following analysis. Finally, they recommended (f) *member checking*—the process of informally and formally checking constructions with stakeholders.

The concept of *external validity* was parallel to *transferability*. Although the traditional concept of *external validity* is not relevant, Lincoln and Guba (1985) conceived of transferability as the researcher's responsibility to provide "the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility" (p. 316).

In addition, Lincoln and Guba (1985) paralleled *reliability* to *dependability*. The latter was to be achieved by using an "inquiry audit," which they described as metaphorically analogous to a fiscal audit in which process and product of the inquiry are examined.

Finally, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified the concept of *objectivity* as parallel to that of *confirmability*. Confirmability refers to the "accuracy of the product" (p. 318). It is "the extent to which the auditor examines the product— the data, findings, interpretations, and recommendations—and attests that it is supported by data and is internally coherent so that the 'bottom line' may be accepted" (p. 318).

The idea of parallel criteria may now seem somewhat defensive and limited, given its reliance on quantitative terms. In general, more recent considerations have moved away from establishing the method's merits and defending its means ("our methods are as good as yours"). Greater acknowledgment of the merits of qualitative methods for all types of research seems to have resulted in less defensive and more creative positions (as well as greater conflict within qualitative circles). Lincoln and Guba's (1985) original ideas are useful, however, for engaging ideas related to reliability and validity and for elucidating several broad concerns, which are generally accepted as the hallmarks of good qualitative work.

An examination of the concepts of *reliability* and *validity* raises important questions and provides insight into how qualitative researchers view the world and their work. These issues are essential to evaluations of quality. In traditional, positivist views, "reliability, or the stability of methods and findings, is an indicator of validity, or the accuracy and truthfulness of the findings" (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 487). In qualitative research, however, the definition of reliability as replication is rejected. Given postpositivist acknowledgments that there is no one "truth" and that all knowledge is constructed, the aim (and even the possibility) of replication is thrown out. Qualitative researchers generally agree that a study cannot be repeated even by the same investigator, given the unique, highly changeable, and personal nature of the research endeavor (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1994).

Having rejected reliability as consistency and replication, a larger question of reliability remains. My argument for a consideration of qualitative research as "reliable" relies on a more common, general understanding of reliability. This understanding incorporates a definition of *rely* as meaning "to depend upon confidently." When asking questions about my own and others' research, I address reliability in the sense of asking, Can I depend upon this (the research process, as well as the findings)? In doing so, I focus on issues related to the following: What types of methods were used in collecting the data? With whom? Under what arrangements? What types of methods were used in analyzing the data? and Who conducted this research (what did they bring to the task)? (This assumes, of course, that the material presented allows one to make such judgments.) This has to do, in part, with the trustworthiness of observations or data (Stiles, 1993). The many ways in which qualitative researchers address this concern are discussed in the "Trustworthiness" section.

An examination of definitions of validity in qualitative research also provides useful insights into issues at the heart of the qualitative research endeavor. These rest upon, and are informed by, philosophical considerations that differ from those underlying quantitative research methods. These include qualitative researchers' emphasis on "the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 4).

In qualitative research, validity is not about establishing the "truth" of "facts" that exist "out there." Although perspectives on validity among qualitative researchers diverge widely (see Altheide & Johnson, 1994), in general the focus has shifted from the "truth of statements" to "understanding by participants and readers" (Mishler, 1990; Stiles, 1993).

For many qualitative researchers, validity is dependent on the audiences or "interpretive communities" and the goals of the research (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). Such a perspective is based on a belief that "[a]ll knowledge and claims to knowledge are reflexive of the process, assumptions, location, history, and context of knowing and the knower" (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 488).

Validity in the qualitative context is integral. As Banister et al. (1994) summarized: "[Validity] has to do with the adequacy of the researcher to understand and represent people's meanings" (p. 143). Validity becomes "a quality of the knower, in relation to her/his data and is enhanced by alternative vantage points and forms of knowing" (Marshall, 1986, p. 197).

This points to the importance of, and the difficulties inherent in, interpretation. If there is no single interpretative truth, how is "interpretive authority" (Hoshmand, 1997) to be established? Questions about whether this "authority" can or should be established are involved in what has been termed a "crisis of legitimation" within qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Validity within qualitative research can be viewed from different positions, including culture, ideology, language, and relevance (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). Clearly, the issues involved are complex, and perspectives within qualitative circles are evolving. Despite these difficulties, qualitative researchers' emphasis on understanding remains a guidepost for considerations of validity.

One way of addressing validity concerns in qualitative research is to use consensus to achieve interpretive conclusions and enhance quality of judgment. An example is the model of consensual qualitative research forwarded by Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997). Reliance on consensus or agreement, however, also raises other challenges in terms of validity (e.g., how to consider minority vs. majority views; see Hoshmand, 1997).

An alternative to considering validity only in terms of consensus is the perspective presented by Stiles (1993). Stiles distinguished between those types of validity that depend on (a) the fit or agreement of new observations or interpretations with one's understanding and (b) the change or growth in one's understanding produced by new observations or interpretations. Stiles also differentiated three classes of people whose understandings might be affected by the research: readers, participants, and the investigators themselves.

Stiles (1993) defined the three types of validity that depend on fit or agreement as (a) *coherence*—quality of interpretation determined by readers; (b) *testimonial validity*—accuracy of interpretation as determined by participants; and (c) *consensus/stability/replication*—interpretations as discussed with other investigators, often through peer debriefing. The types of validity that depend on change or growth are (a) *uncovering and self-evidence*—evaluations of fruitfulness and "fit" by readers; (b) *catalytic validity*—the degree to which the research process "reorients, focuses, and energizes participants" (p. 611); and (c) *reflexive validity*—evaluation of how theory or an investigator's way of thinking is changed by the data.

Stiles's (1993) attention to various audiences, as well as to the processes and goals of the research, points to the kind of validity I believe is important in qualitative research. My considerations regarding validity in qualitative research are based on assessing the extent to which the research is "soundly founded on fact or evidence" (the common understanding of validity) and how it meets concerns such as those indicated by Stiles.

In assessing others' qualitative work, my questions include, How were the data analyzed? How did the researcher determine when to stop collecting data? and By what processes were interpretations made? I also ask, Do these interpretations make sense? Were these checked out with participants? With other researchers? and Did changes occur in the researcher's understanding or theory on the basis of what was found? As a researcher, I work to incorporate these issues into the research process.

Reliability and validity, then, are not properties of the research tool as they are in quantitative research. Rather, reliability and validity depend on the relationship between the researcher and the research process, as well as between the researcher and the interpretive community. The researcher's engagement with issues of reliability and validity begins at the conception of the research project and runs through to the dissemination of findings. The weight of providing "evidence" of reliability and validity rests on the researcher; such evidence must be presented for assessment by those seeking to understand the research.

Attempts by qualitative researchers to increase the reliability and validity of the research process and findings are addressed next as they relate to issues of trustworthiness, reflexivity, and representation. All three are interconnected and are primary to evaluations of quality.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Many qualitative researchers have forwarded trustworthiness as a primary criterion for evaluation of quality. Trustworthiness encompasses elements of "good practice" that are present throughout the research process (Banister et al., 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stiles, 1993). Several of these were described in the previous section addressing the parallel criterion of credibility. Elements of trustworthiness, from a review by Stiles (1993), include (a) disclosure of the researcher's orientation, (b) intensive and prolonged engagement with the material, (c) persistent observation, (d) triangulation, and (e) discussion of findings and process with others. As Stiles summarized, it also involves the iterative cycling between observation and interpretation or between dialogue with text. It entails "grounding" the interpretations by using individual examples in the data to support abstractions or higher-level theorizing.

Trustworthiness also encompasses efforts to reduce—or at the very least to make explicit—sources of bias by the researcher. A qualitative approach to the problem of bias is to "increase the investigators'—and readers'—exposure to the phenomenon" (Stiles, 1993, p. 614) by using intensive interviews and by providing "thick descriptions" (p. 614) of the data. In addition, Stiles (1993) identified triangulation, responsible searching for negative instances, and repeatedly seeking consensus through peer debriefing as elements of good practice.

The commitment to revealing, rather than avoiding, the researcher's involvement is consistent with the shift from the truth of statement to understanding by participants and readers. This prompts the need for disclosure and explication of the researcher's orientation. As Stiles (1993) noted, "Having [the researcher's] orientation in mind, whether or not we share it, helps us put their interpretations in perspective" (p. 602). In addition, qualitative researchers may provide an explication of social and cultural contexts and the internal processes during the investigation as they constitute a part of the meaning of the study's observations and interpretations (Stiles, 1993).

Although these elements are generally conceived as accepted steps toward trustworthiness, I agree with Steinmetz (1991) that "trustworthiness is more than a set of procedures . . . it is a personal belief system that shapes the procedures in process" (p. 93). Consistent with this is an awareness that issues of trustworthiness are with us even before we enter the field from the time we conceptualize an object of study. Trustworthiness, then, has to do with how one approaches, collects, analyzes, interprets, and reports data. A primary emphasis is placed on making the steps and influences conscious to the researcher and visible to readers. Implicit in the aim of trustworthiness is a goal of awareness of self-as-researcher engaging in the research process. Qualitative research has an inherent concern with reflexivity.

REFLEXIVITY

Acknowledgment that the researcher is central in the construction of knowledge leads qualitative researchers to emphasize the reflexive aspects of the research process. As Altheide and Johnson (1994) noted, "One meaning of reflexivity is that the scientific observer is part and parcel of the setting, context and culture he or she is trying to understand and represent" (p. 486). Reflexivity is the attempt to deal with this; Wilkinson (1988) defined it as "disciplined self-reflection" (p. 493). Banister et al. (1994) further described it as "an attempt to make explicit the process by which the material and analysis are produced" (p. 149).

Commitment to reflexivity suggests that the research topic, design, and process, together with the personal experience of doing the research, are reflected on and critically evaluated throughout. Wilkinson (1988) identified three types of reflexivity: personal, functional, and disciplinary. Banister et al. (1994) summarized Wilkinson's work in a way that directly expresses the relevant issues for our concerns. Wilkinson's *personal reflexivity* is "about acknowledging who you are, your individuality as a researcher and how your personal interests and values influence the process of research from initial idea to outcome" (Banister et al., 1994, p. 150). *Functional reflexivity* entails "continuous critical examination of the practice/process of research to reveal its assumptions, values, and biases" (p. 151). *Disciplinary reflexivity* involves

reflecting on larger issues that include "research methodology and questioning psychology itself" (p. 172).

Assumptions that all findings are constructions incorporating one's personal view of reality and that these are open to change and reconstruction entail the need for qualitative researchers to make explicit the process through which their understandings were formed. Given that the reader evaluates trustworthiness through what is presented, a premium is placed on the researcher's ability to communicate in a compelling way what and how he found what he did, as well as the meaning he makes of it. This endeavor, by extending considerations of reflexivity to the writing process, also presents significant challenges.

REPRESENTATION

A pressing issue in the evaluation of qualitative research stems from an acknowledgment of "expanding conceptions of the nature of knowledge and the relationship between what one knows and how it is represented" (Eisner, 1997, p. 4). Qualitative researchers such as Fine (1994) have emphasized that "Self and Other are knottily entangled. This relationship, as lived between researchers and informants, is typically obscured in social science texts, protecting privilege, securing distance, and laminating the contradictions" (p. 72).

Our efforts to produce research that is reliable, valid, trustworthy, and reflexive are inextricably connected with issues of representation. Representation is not just about "writing up" the findings after concluding the study; rather, it is integral to the research process, and some suggest it may constitute the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). As previously addressed, the inclusion of narrative and personal material about the researcher and the research process provides a way for readers to evaluate the research. Some qualitative researchers (e.g., Fine, 1992; Lather, 1991) argue that the ways we present our data have as much to do with who we are and say as much about us as they do about our participants and our findings.

One key assumption of qualitative research has been "that qualitative researchers can directly capture lived experience" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 11). However, this view has recently been rejected in recent arguments that such experience "is created in the social text written by the researcher" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 11). Resultant conflicts have led to what has been called a "crisis of representation" within qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Given the difficulties inherent in representation, some researchers have retreated from analysis and withdrawn from interpretation in their writing (Fine & Weis, 1996). Simply presenting the participants' voices, however, is not a satisfying option because researchers—in particular, psychologists— presumably bring something to the endeavor. In this matter, I would extend Altheide and Johnson's (1994) task for ethnographers to psychologists: "[T]he key issue is not to capture the informant's voice, but to elucidate the experience that is implicated by the subjects in the context of their activities as they perform

them, and as they are understood by the [researcher]" (p. 491). The task for psychology, then, is to engage with how researchers package what they say about those they study (Fine, 1992; Lather, 1991).

Various ways of dealing with "problems of representation" have been forwarded. One possibility, proposed by Kvale (1996), is that of a narrative approach to interview analysis. Kvale assumes that an interviewee's statements are not collected but are "coauthored" in the sense that "[the interviewer's] questions lead to the aspects of a topic the subject will address, and his or her active listening and following up on the answers codetermines the course of the conversation" (p. 281). Kvale's narrative approach entails "going back to the original story told by the interviewee and anticipating the final story to be reported to an audience" (p. 282).

Another possibility, presented by L. Richardson (1995), is to create "writing stories." As Richardson summarized: "Rather than hiding the struggle, concealing the very human labor that creates the text, writing stories would reveal emotional, social, physical, and political bases of the labor" (p. 191).

As qualitative research continues to evolve, different forms of presenting qualitative work will need to be developed. The means of assessing quality that have been suggested here are not easily incorporated within the traditional formats for "scholarly" research. An immediate problem is that nontraditional forms of writing are not accepted by mainstream psychology journals.

The role of the researcher in the task of representation will also continue to change. More collaborative projects in which work is explicitly coauthored by researchers and participants may emerge (e.g., Lather's [1995] research with women with HIV/AIDS). Such attempts, however, must acknowledge that these efforts neither eliminate the researcher's position of power nor obviate the fact that researchers have set up a relationship for their purposes.

In these matters, I believe that psychology has much to offer in determining the direction that qualitative research takes from this point. In particular, feminist psychology may provide crucial insights. Feminist scholars' attention to issues of power in relationships and the dynamics that result from inequity are especially promising (e.g., Acker, Barry, & Esseveld's [1991] treatment of problems related to "objectivity" and "truth" in feminist research). Feminist psychology, in addition, has shown commitment to dealing with underaddressed populations and with the complexities of representation. Relevant examples include Wilkinson's (1996) and others' (including D. Richardson, 1996; Russell, 1996) explorations of difficulties inherent in what are termed "representing the 'Other.'"

New directions for qualitative research may incorporate radically different criteria for evaluation. One recent example is Lincoln's (1995) proposal that included such elements as (a) *positionality*—displaying honesty about stance; (b) *concern about voice*—attending to who speaks, for whom, to whom, for what purposes; (c) *reciprocity*—studying the relations researchers make; (d) *sacredness*—honoring ecological concerns; and (e) *sharing the prerequisites*

of privilege—participants' receipt of benefits from the research. Although it remains to be seen whether qualitative researchers will embrace such new criteria, considerations for "validity" are clearly evolving to engage some of the complex issues indicated.

Our current concerns involve issues of empirical accountability that entail the need to offer grounds on which to accept a researcher's description and analysis, as well as finding ways to establish the trustworthiness of data within the inquiry. Lather's (1993) attempt to "reframe" validity is relevant here. Instead of stressing a concern with "epistemological guarantees," Lather views validity as "multiple, partial, endlessly deferred" (p. 675). She identified the need for "seeing what frames our seeing—spaces of constructed visibility and incitements to see which constitute power/knowledge" (p. 675).

As this treatment points out, answers (and the difficulties inherent in them) to questions about what constitutes quality in qualitative research are complex. My redefined "reliability" and "validity," then, are relevant and necessary but are not sufficient criteria for evaluating quality. At the center are issues about what research is, what it is for, and who ought to have access to it (Lincoln, 1995). These concerns have ramifications beyond those related to qualitative research methods and speak to issues at the heart of psychology.

CONCLUSION

A review of the literature in this area suggests an ongoing conversation about issues of quality in qualitative research. Until relatively recently, scholars of qualitative research worked toward establishing the method's merits and defending its means. Greater acknowledgment of the benefits of qualitative methods, however, has led to less defensive and more creative positions (as well as to increased conflict within qualitative circles). Although qualitative researchers exhibit wide variation in their definitions of, and positions on, criteria for assessing quality, they do exhibit consensus about concerns encompassed by trustworthiness and reflexivity. In addition, recent attention has been given to the importance of representation in qualitative work. In summary, qualitative research may appropriately be called "reliable" and "valid"; however, these terms, even redefined, are insufficient to cover the multitude of complex issues involved in discussing evaluations of quality. The fact that conversations about these issues are ongoing suggests exciting directions for the future.

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