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Simple but Effective Criteria: Rethinking Excellent Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Despite unremitting efforts to develop quality criteria of qualitative research, traditional criteria for the trustworthiness of qualitative results are still predominant in interpretive and naturalistic inquiries including Ph.D. studies. This work does not aim to replace the existing quality criteria but rather to update and simplify those criteria to include credibility, confirmability, and representativeness. The purpose of the study is to offer a review of existing criteria and strategies for qualitative research and to suggest simple criteria and strategies that will win the confidence of the academic community and augment the trustworthiness of qualitative research.

Keywords

quality, qualitative, criteria, revision, research

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Simple but Effective Criteria: Rethinking Excellent Qualitative Research

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Despite unremitting efforts to develop quality criteria of qualitative research, traditional criteria for the trustworthiness of qualitative results are still predominant in interpretive and naturalistic inquiries including Ph.D. studies. This work does not aim to replace the existing quality criteria but rather to update and simplify those criteria to include credibility, confirmability, and representativeness. The purpose of the study is to offer a review of existing criteria and strategies for qualitative research and to suggest simple criteria and strategies that will win the confidence of the academic community and augment the trustworthiness of qualitative research.

Keywords: quality, qualitative, criteria, revision, research

Introduction

No doubt, there is increasing interest in the quality criteria of qualitative research and efforts have been made to update existing standards or to develop unified standards for the guidance of naturalistic researchers equivalent to those found in the positivist paradigm (Morse, 2015). This diversity in criteria may be why critics are reluctant to accept the trustworthiness of qualitative research (e.g., Anney, 2014; Elliott et al., 1999; Levitt et al., 2021; Morrow, 2005; Morse, 2015). Various criteria have been published in the qualitative literature (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Healy & Perry, 2000; Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). Among these, Guba's criteria (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) are well-known and accepted among scholars and researchers in pursuit of trustworthy research. These criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. There has been significant progress regarding the quality of the suggestions emerging from critical debates on quality criteria of naturalistic inquiry. Over the past twenty years, there have been calls for a redefinition of quality criteria in that area of inquiry (e.g., Shenton, 2004). On the other side of this progress made regarding quality criteria of naturalistic inquiry, positivist researchers have developed four quality criteria for positivist inquiry: internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Cook et al., 2002). For decades, these criteria have won acceptance among positivist observers as means of assessing the rigor of positivist inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We argue in this paper that although Guba's criteria were well-cited over the last decades, we believe that it is time to update and simplify these criteria for the following reasons: (1) although of the effectiveness of these criteria, they are not equally important; (2) there is an additional criterion that should be added, which is "representation." It is known that the wrong samples can lead to negative consequences, and thus many of the conclusions drawn may be unwarranted. The advantage of simplifying criteria is to help researchers focus only on three key criteria that help achieve trustworthiness. As already mentioned, not all criteria have the same importance, and thus removing these criteria will not affect the results and can save researchers time and effort. This study aims to discuss Guba's constructs and supply further details about each one. It suggests a set of places for a

revision of Guba's constructs and also defines the criteria that would enable qualitative researchers to employ the better practice in assessing the quality of their research projects.

Current Quality Criteria

Guba's (1981) criteria, (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability), is the oldest and most commonly adopted by researchers of naturalistic inquiry over the last five decades (Table 1). According to Saunders et al., (2019), qualitative research is associated with an interpretive paradigm where "researchers need to make sense of the subjective and socially constructed meanings expressed about the phenomenon being studied. Such research is sometimes referred to as naturalistic" (p. 179). There have been ongoing attempts to change, revise, and/or develop quality criteria of qualitative research, and, worthy as these attempts undoubtedly are, there remains an essential need for more debate of the uniqueness of traditional qualitative research criteria (credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability) for more than four decades (Table 1). For example, Tracy's (2010) article suggests eight key criteria of quality in qualitative research including (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. Although these eight criteria are important, they are not without criticism. More specifically, Tracy admits that the idea of universal criteria for qualitative quality represents the most controversial part in the qualitative literature. Therefore, she suggests that "we need not be so tied to epistemology or ontology (or the philosophy of the world) that we cannot agree on several common end goals of good qualitative research" (p. 849).

Table 1
Guba's Quality Criteria

Credibility	Refers to the confidence placed in the truth of the research findings. It establishes whether the findings stem from the data collected from interviewees and, importantly, it establishes whether the way in which the data were interpreted and reported has distorted the real meaning of the data.
Dependability	Refers to the extent to which the research findings are stable over time. Dependability establishes whether the research findings would be consistently repeated if the research were to be replicated, either with the same investigator or with another, either in the same context or in a different one.
Transferability	Refers to the degree to which the research findings of a particular qualitative inquiry could be transferred to other settings and could be applied by other respondents.
Confirmability	Establishes whether the research data and interpretations of the findings are figments of the investigator's imagination or whether they are entirely derived from the statements of respondents.

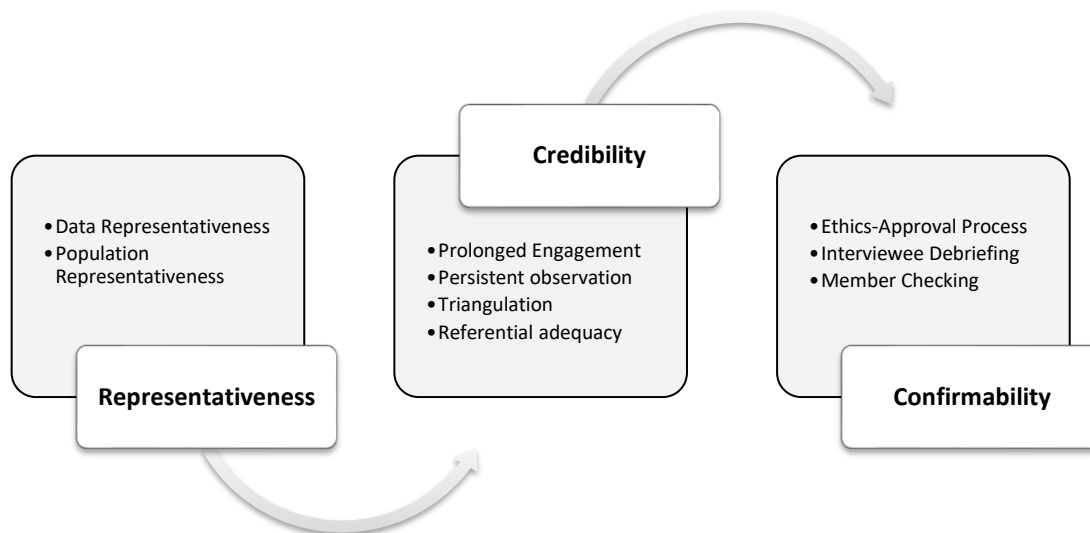
We argue that no criteria in the literature can completely ensure the quality of qualitative research. For example, qualitative research aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of individuals and/or groups within particular organisations, cultures, or nations. It is known that skeptical voices and criticisms often come from untargeted samples in the research due to reasons such as differences of opinion, contradictions, competition, hostility, social class, differences in economic and educational levels, ethical and cultural differences,

religious or political affiliations, etc. These contradictories and differences may be a real barrier to drawing warranted conclusions. Thus, well-selected samples represent one of the most important quality criteria. In other words, well-represented samples help to ensure that results and conclusions drawn are warranted.

It is argued in this study that quality criteria should function as a checkpoint across all stages of the research process, from the time of data collection to the time of reporting the results. Also, we argue that credibility and confirmability are primary constructs, while transferability and dependability are secondary constructs and that, if one of these latter constructs is not utilised, it does not necessarily mean that the research fails to meet quality criteria of qualitative research. We would also add the representativeness construct to the credibility and confirmability constructs, forming quality criteria by means of these three constructs (Figure 1 below).

Figure 1

Three Dimensions of Quality for Qualitative Research



Revised and Simplified Quality Criteria

Credibility

Internal validity, which represents one of the fundamental criteria in the positivist paradigm, is defined as “the validity of inferences about whether observed covariation between A (the presumed treatment) and B (the presumed outcome) reflects a causal relationship from A to B as those variables were manipulated or measured” (Cook et al., 2002, p. 38). Credibility is perceived as a qualitative construct equivalent to internal validity (Lincoln, 1995). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility establishes whether the research findings represent the essence of the research data and indicates whether the findings reflect a correct interpretation of the interviewees’ original statements. Qualitative inquiry investigation establishes the rigor of the inquiry by utilising a set of strategies. In this review, we suggest specific strategies, i.e., prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, referential adequacy, and an ethics-approval process (Table 2).

Table 2

<i>Simple Quality Criteria for Qualitative Research</i>		
Criteria	Strategies	Definitions and Methods
Credibility	Prolonged Engagement	<p>Definition: The investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes, such as familiarisation with the culture and the building of trust.</p> <p>Methods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choosing the right time for data collection • Understanding the context from which research data is to be collected • Testing for misinformation provided by interviewees • Building trust between the interviewer and the interviewees prior to data collection. • Re-contacting the participants for an informal talk after the interviews have taken place.
	Persistent observation	<p>Definition: A strategy for identifying the characteristics and elements of the situations that are most relevant to the problems or issues being pursued and focusing on them in detail.</p> <p>Methods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading and interpreting hints that may emanate from the interviewee. • Observing and recording body language and facial expressions of the interviewee. • Paying attention to the way the interviewee reacts when asked questions or making comments.
	Triangulation	<p>Definition: A strategy that employs a multiplicity of sources, methods, investigators and theories.</p> <p>Methods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of both individual interviews and group interviews. • The use of observations derived from meetings.

Confirmability

Referential adequacy

- The use of documents (e.g., annual reports, newspapers, websites and achieves).

Definition:

An activity that enables the checking of preliminary findings and interpretations against archived raw data.

Methods:

- The use of recorded data (audio, video, photographs),
- The use of notes during interviews.
- The use of informal conversation and communication prior to conducting interviews.

Interviewee Debriefing

Definition:

A strategy that allows participants in the research to review the findings and the ways of reporting and interpreting the findings. It provides the participants with an opportunity to confirm the credibility of the research findings.

Methods:

- Testing samples of the participants' statements to ensure that the participants have answered their research questions (e.g., whether interviewees support the findings or whether they suggest changes or revisions of their statements).

Member Checking

Definition:

A strategy that allows specialised and experienced persons to review the data and the research process. The main purpose of this strategy is to challenge the researchers' assumptions. This will include asking difficult questions about the methodology and interpretations of the data.

Methods:

- The use of two additional investigators, one internal and one external. One of them must be a specialist in the field and the other a specialist in methodology. They check and review the data, its analysis and the findings of the report.

	<p>Ethics-Approval Process</p>	<p>Definition: Represents one of the crucial steps within quality criteria for ensuring the ethical standards and scientific merit of research involving human subjects.</p> <p>Methods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An initial application summarising the study's objectives and potential participants. • Follow-up approval after conducting all interviews. <p>Final approval to ensure that the participants have answered the defined research questions.</p>
	<p>Data Representativeness</p>	<p>Definition: Refers to the extent to which data collected from the interviewees represent the phenomenon under investigation.</p> <p>Methods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research questions stemming from existing research gaps. • Interview questions stemming from the research questions. • Semi-structured interviews giving the researcher the necessary flexibility to swipe the interviewee' focus on particular part
<p>Representativeness</p>	<p>Population Representativeness</p>	<p>Definition: Refers to the extent to which the targeted interviewees represent the "right" participants from the "right" population suited to the researcher's intention to explore and understand a particular topic.</p> <p>Methods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of a mix of non-probability samples: purposive, snowball, quota, and convenience when the aim of study is to explore and understand a phenomenon "as a whole." • The use of a purposive sample if the aim of the study is to explore and understand a phenomenon as "part of a whole."

Prolonged Engagement

Prolonged engagement is the investment of sufficient time for the achievement of certain purposes, such as familiarisation with the culture and the building of trust (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Self-immersion of the project's investigator into the participants' world represents one key pillar of this strategy in qualitative inquiry (Bitsch, 2005). The level of the investigator's immersion in the participants' world will allow him or her to build a deeper understanding of the phenomenon observed. According to Gill and Johnson (2010), participation in the lives and activities of participants enables the investigator not only to observe what is happening but also to feel it; the investigator is directly involved in the phenomenon under investigation. For example, an investigator takes part in an experimental study to explore and understand the effectiveness of a new leadership development programme designed by the investigator. The investigator closely observes the process of participants' progress during the application of the leadership development programme from beginning to end. However, although prolonged engagement can add value and credibility to the research through the details that the researcher/observer obtains, it should only be utilised in longitudinal studies that require the researcher to spend sufficient time (months or even years) in developing trust and a strong relationship with participants in that setting. The researcher should gain a holistic and detailed understanding of the process involved before beginning to observe situations, individuals, people, or organisations for research purposes. During this stage, critical questions may be asked; for example, does the observer note any unusual physical or mental reactions on the part of the participants? If so, further persistent observation can enrich the data and establish credibility. Prolonged engagement can add values in most studies that require the researcher to understand a phenomenon within a particular period. An example from tourism is to explore and understand how a group of teenagers behave when they go on a two-week holiday without their parents. The researcher needs to stay close to this group of teenagers to understand their behaviours. The researcher may hear statements such as, "Hooray! No restrictions or no home rules." Another example from nursing is when the researcher aims to understand how nurses' communication styles help to minimise the pressure on pregnant women during the pregnancy stages, labour, and giving birth. It is not enough to collect data from nurses who are closely operating with pregnant women during labour; this should begin from early stages of pregnancy to the stage of giving birth. Any small details can enrich the data and establish credibility. Prolonged engagement may not add value if the researcher can't cover all pregnancy stages including labour and giving birth.

Persistent Observation

"Persistent observation" refers to characteristics and elements identified by the investigator in a specific situation, time, setting, or context related to the problem or issue being investigated and focusing on those characteristics and elements in detail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A key characteristic of persistent observation is that it enables the investigator to observe participants' reactions, behaviour, facial expressions, and changes in the vocal spectrum, phenomena that cannot be comprehensively observed in telephone interviews or in other forms of indirect communication. Persistent observation can give the investigator valuable insights regarding the hidden feelings of participants on whether they are telling the truth, whether they take the research questions seriously, or whether they are giving "diplomatic" answers to some questions. Serious issues may arise during encounters with sensitive topics, such as ethical or sexual behaviour, political or religious affiliations, or drug use. Face-to-face interviews or observations made during formal or informal meetings will therefore help the investigator to observe previously unseen issues through direct communication with interviewees. For

instance, an investigator may take part in a formal meeting within an institution or team to explore and understand how particular problems or tasks are managed. The experience of the investigator may affect the level of observation. In line with this argument, Monette et al. (2013) assert that the quality of the findings from observational studies depends on the researcher's skills and experience. Therefore, the use of video recordings during the observation is crucial in cases where Ph.D. students and naive researchers are involved since recordings allow a researcher to document every moment of the observation, thus enabling colleagues, supervisors, external members, and others to review records and obtain a second opinion on the observation notes. Schwandt (2014) raised two criticisms of qualitative research in relation to researchers' bias in the conduct of a study and presentation of interpretations based on nonneutral positions. Roulston and Shelton (2015) argue that it is difficult to control for the personal attributes of researchers during interviews because studies that rely on foundationalist assumptions where the researcher is the instrument will be subject to accusations of bias. Indeed, all researchers, including Ph.D. students, should accept this procedure to reduce the potential for researcher bias (Doyle, 2007). Persistent observation can be used for face-to-face interviews and research-based observation (e.g., longitudinal studies). For face-to-face interviews (both individual and group interviews), the observation occurs from the time the researcher enters the interview room to the time the researcher leaves. Face-to-face interviews in qualitative research are usually restricted by time (Bell et al., 2022), and the researcher is therefore responsible for garnering as much detail as possible while conducting an interview within the time available for observation.

Triangulation

Triangulation, as a critical strategy for the establishment of credibility, involves the use of a multiplicity of different sources, methods, investigators, and/or theories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One of the earliest studies on how to triangulate was that of Denzin (1978), who described triangulation as "the combination of methodologies." Denzin proposed that the main purpose of triangulation is to establish credibility in the research methodology. He was the first researcher to suggest the following four types of triangulation: (a) data triangulation (using a variety of sources that serve the research purpose), (b) investigator triangulation (several researchers take part in the research), (c) theory triangulation (the use of multiple perspectives to interpret the findings), and (d) methodological triangulation (the use of multiple methods of data collection).

As there is an interaction between strategies used to establish quality criteria in qualitative research and the types of triangulation outlined by Denzin (1978), we argue that triangulation in qualitative research occurs if the researcher adopts three elements: a) interviews, b) observation, and c) relevant documents. All three contribute to data analysis.

Referential Adequacy

Referential adequacy refers to a set of recorded materials that makes possible the checking of data analysis, preliminary findings and their interpretations and final conclusions of the topic under investigation in order to evaluate their adequacy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The referential supportive materials are not limited to electronically recorded data (e.g., videos, audios), but may include other, non-recorded, data (e.g., online website data, annual reports, relevant information published via social media, images, votes, etc.), which relate to the raw data but are not used for reporting and interpreting the researcher's findings. For example, if the researcher aims to explore and understand the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the productivity of private event companies, the use of recent annual reports of these companies is

very helpful, because information obtained from them can be used by the researcher to evaluate the sufficiency of the information obtained from interviews, as well as the accuracy of the findings.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the research findings are accepted and confirmed by other findings. According to Tobin and Begley (2004, p. 392), confirmability is “concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer’s imagination but are clearly derived from the data.” Although research on quality criteria of qualitative inquiry discusses several strategies for the achievement of confirmability, the audit trail is the only strategy that is accepted among researchers (e.g., Bowen, 2009; Koch, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017; Shenton, 2004). In this study, we suggest three strategies that contribute to the establishment of confirmability: interviewee debriefing, checking of members, and an ethical approval process.

Interviewee Debriefing

Qualitative research interviewees represent a key asset of any research. We suggest in this study that interviewee debriefing is a strategy that allows participants in research to review the findings and the ways in which these findings are reported and interpreted, thereby offering participants an opportunity to confirm the credibility of the research findings. Although a peer debriefing strategy was suggested several decades ago, little research has relied on the debriefing of interviewees (e.g., Sweeney et al., 2020). We suggest that once the researcher completes data collection, data analysis, interpretation, and reporting of the “informal” findings, a sample of interviewees can be selected for debriefing. This step provides the researcher and the study with concentrated multiple opinions regarding meanings, interpretations, and conclusions.

Member Checking

Member checking is a strategy that allows specialised and experienced persons to review the data and the research processes. The main purpose of this strategy is to challenge the researchers’ assumptions, for example, by asking difficult questions about the methodology and interpretations of the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 2004). Member checking or informant feedback is one of the most crucial strategies for establishing confirmability, due to the part it plays in eliminating the possibility of misrepresentation and misinterpretation of vocal tones (Maxwell, 1996). Lincoln and Guba (1985) have proposed that the member-checking strategy should be divided into an informal (internal) and a formal (external) stage. For effective use of the member-checking strategy, we suggest in this study that two investigators are required for the member-checking strategy: one internal member from the same institution, and one external member from another institution. One of the members must be specialised in the researcher’s field and the other must be a specialist in methodology. Their task is to check and review the data collection process, the data analysis, and the meaning and interpretation of the findings and conclusions. The importance of this step is to enhance the quality of the research, especially if it is a Ph.D. thesis, and reduce any unintentional bias from the supervisor. This is highly recommended in fields such as psychology and social science because research results may be interpreted in different ways. (See also, Piette & Ross, 1992).

Representativeness

Representativeness is one of the most important quality criteria of qualitative research. Maxwell (1992) linked representativeness to generalisability and distinguished between two types of generalisability in qualitative research: (1) generalising from within the society, group, or organisation that was investigated to individuals, situations and contexts that were not interviewed or observed, and (2) generalising to other societies, groups, or organisations. According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007), although qualitative studies typically rely on small samples, choice of sample size still is an important consideration. In this study, we attempt to restrict our discussion of this criterion into an examination of two strategies in qualitative research: data representativeness and population representativeness.

Data Representativeness

Data representativeness refers to the extent to which data collected from the interviewees represent the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, we argue that the importance of data representativeness in naturalistic paradigm must be equally considered in accordance with positivist paradigms. Although researchers often distinguish qualitative research data from quantitative data in terms of its small size, there has been no discussion of the assertion that the small size of qualitative research data has the same power as quantitative data representation. This was well explained by Connolly (1998) who points out that qualitative research does not make statistical generalizations because its goal usually is not to make inferences about a phenomenon under investigation, but rather it attempts to obtain ideas and insights around particular phenomenon and understand practices that exist within a specific context. It is known that sample sizes in qualitative research should not be too small because it is difficult to achieve data saturation. Similarly, they should not be too large because it would be difficult to extract thick and rich data (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Researchers in the naturalistic paradigm need to ensure that they meet two critical conditions: (1) the research questions that need to be answered must be carefully designed; and (2) interview questions that enable answers to the research questions must be carefully designed. Without these two conditions, naturalistic researchers will be unable to explore and understand the phenomenon under investigation and run an increasing chance of failure in theory-building. Consequently, data representativeness must be seriously considered in the interests of successful research.

Population Representativeness

Population representativeness refers to the extent to which the targeted interviewees represent the “right” participants from the “right” population through which the researcher intends to explore and understand a particular topic. No doubt, qualitative research samples are smaller than their quantitative counterparts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). However, we argue this small size is risky. Specifically, an appropriate qualitative sample that does not reflect the diversity of the population or does not represent the appropriate population will fail to give adequate answers to the research questions, with the result that the research findings are likely to be questionable. Marshall (1996) argues that “an appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research question” (p. 523). Small unrepresentative qualitative data no doubt perform as badly as large unrepresentative quantitative data (e.g., Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

Figure 2
Exploring a phenomenon “as a whole”

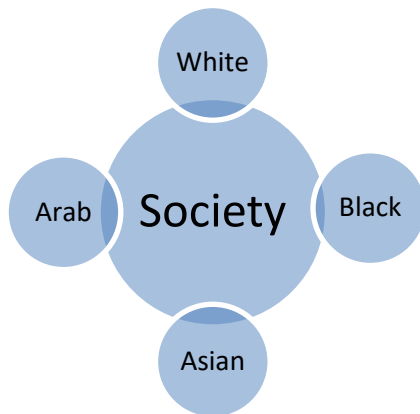
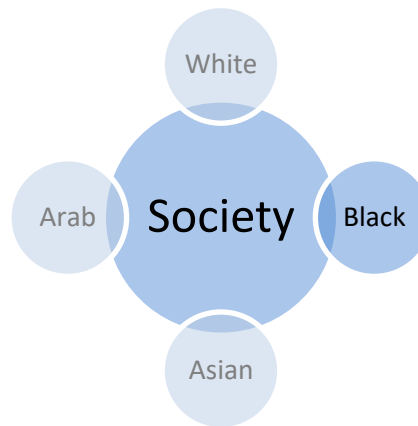


Figure 3
A phenomenon as “part of a whole”



In this study, we argue that the “population” representativeness in qualitative research can be achieved under one of the following conditions:

Exploring a phenomenon “as a whole”

When the study aims to explore and understand a phenomenon “as a whole” in a society, an organisation or an individual, the researcher utilises a mixture of non-probability samples (purposive, snowball, quota, and convenience). For example, if the study aims to explore and understand the effectiveness of the leadership styles of both male and female leaders, the effectiveness of leadership styles in different contexts, such as in the non-profit sector, in the UK, etc., must be understood (Figure 2).

Exploring a phenomenon as “part of a whole”

This is when the study aims to explore and understand a phenomenon as “part of a whole” in a society, organisation, or individual. For example, the study might aim to explore and understand the lived experience of female leaders in, for example, the Football Association (FA), which is part of UK Sport; or in a particular location or community, such as the Asian community, or Londoners; that is, constituent parts of a whole population. Research evidence revealed that combining “purposeful” sampling strategies help for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). We argue that it is more appropriate to employ purposive samples in exploring a phenomenon as “part of a whole) to answer particular research questions (Figure 3).

Quality Criteria Without Transferability and Dependability

In this study, we suggest simple criteria and strategies that stem from the first debates on quality criteria of naturalistic inquiry (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We argue in the present study that qualitative research without transferability and dependability is nevertheless capable of achieving the trustworthiness of qualitative inquiry and of gaining the confidence of the academic community. The reasons for this assertion will be discussed in the following section.

Why Is Transferability Less Important in the Qualitative Inquiry?

“Transferability” refers to the extent to which the findings of a qualitative study can be applied in another setting, context, or nation. More specifically, transferability asks whether the same findings can be obtained with other respondents if we repeat a qualitative study in other locations (Hellström, 2008); therefore, it is perceived as the equivalent of generalisability (Sinkovics et al., 2008). According to Given (2008),

a study is not deemed unworthy if it cannot be applied to broader contexts: instead, a study’s worthiness is determined by how well others can determine (i.e., through a paper trail) to which alternative contexts the findings might be applied. (p. 895)

However, the risk here lies in the fact that researchers, observers, and supervisors, by member checking, are theoretically interpreting the behaviour of human beings who themselves continually engage in theoretical interpretation of one another’s conduct (Rex, 2006). This is evident in the controversial issues within societies. For example, the findings of a study conducted by Western researchers on what are deemed in the West to be underage marriages may not be transferable to certain Eastern societies, where such marriages are justified in terms of culture or religion. Another relevant example can be drawn from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, wherein Jerusalem is deemed a sacred location by both sides. For that reason, the findings of research claiming that one of the parties involved represents the aboriginal population of Jerusalem will be unacceptable to the other. Thus, the findings are not transferable to that other. One exception of the transferability is when we investigate a phenomenon and we anticipate the outcome (e.g., why do drugs and alcohol increase anti-social behaviours in X country?). When we investigate this topic in another country, it would help us build a big picture on how drugs and alcohol would encourage anti-social behaviours in two different geographic locations. But transferability is not applicable if the researcher intends to investigate this topic in a country ban both drugs and alcohol. As a result, we believe that transferability should not be deemed as one of the essential quality criteria, since the quality of the qualitative inquiry remains established without that criterion. Additionally, transferability is not applicable in certain topics or contexts. However, when the findings are new, researchers need to investigate the same topics using the same aims/objectives and interview questions in other settings or locations to ensure they get the same results. In this case, repetition of the same research over time would help to build a wide base of findings and interpretations linked to particular settings, contexts, nations, or cultures. Thus, it may be possible to determine over time the alternative settings to which the findings might be applied.

Why is Dependability Less Important in Qualitative Inquiry?

“Dependability” refers to the stability of findings over time. It is defined by Gasson (2004, p. 94), who asserts that “the way in which a study is conducted should be consistent across time, researchers, and analysis techniques.” It is perceived as the equivalent of “reliability” in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability emphasises that the process through which the research findings are derived should be repeatable through tracking the same research design, including data collection, data analysis, themes, sub-themes, categories, and memoranda. Thus, the audit trail provides a transparent description of stages of the research from beginning to end and allows that description to be examined by others. As with transferability, the danger contained in dependability lies in the fact that there is a variety of factors that can affect the research setting. Accordingly, repeating the process through which

the findings are derived may not necessarily produce similar results. This does not mean, however, that the research will fail to establish trustworthiness. For example, the findings identified by means of exploring factors influencing the satisfaction of zero-contract employees may not have the same result if the travel agency that employs them engages new staff every three months. In this case, if a new researcher repeats this study following the audit trail used by the previous researcher it will not mean that both researchers have similar findings. Another example can be derived from research findings on the demographic characteristics of a town, (for example, a holiday destination), before and after the demographic change of this town, due to factors such as immigration, movement of population to big cities, emigration, etc. Similarly, the findings generated from research that investigated the quality of life in X city may not be the same if the same researcher intends to repeat the same study in the same city, but after a disaster (e.g., radioactive contamination or a 9.5 magnitude earthquake) that may leave long-term negative effects with important implications for both the tourists and locals, the results would not be the same. As a result, we believe that dependability should not be deemed as one of the essential quality criteria, since the quality of the qualitative inquiry remains established without it. However, dependability could be essential for trustworthiness when two researchers adopt a comparative study conducted twice in the same setting at two different times, in order to gain an understanding of a phenomenon.

Reflexivity

We have discussed a range of issues that impact the quality of qualitative inquiry. However, this sort of inquiry also involves an engagement with reflexive issues regarding the status of the researcher vis-à-vis epistemological matters. In qualitative enquiry, the researcher is central to the sense that is made; it is their “take” on the data produced and interpreted that is key to the enterprise. Different researchers will come to a topic of qualitative enquiry with different analytical purposes (Altheide & Johnson, 2011); this does not mean that they are simply engaging in something akin to a journalistic enterprise. The rigour of the study being undertaken in terms of adopting a systematic approach that is sensitive to the phenomenon being investigated is important, but researchers need to be aware that they are not immune from the very socio-cultural practices they seek to study. The social practice of interpreting something and how this is undertaken is something that qualitative researchers may wish to reflect upon (Berger, 2015). The stock-in-trade of qualitative enquiry is the symbolic world of words and images, and it behoves researchers engaging in this kind of work to address the quality of their own enquires by reflexively and openly examining how they manipulate these in the data that they collect (see also, Smith, 2004).

There are other kinds of reflexive dimensions that researchers can benefit from in their work. Being critically self-reflexive is one such aspect when it comes to analysing qualitative data. As was noted above, the researcher is central to the sense that is made of the data, and this is particularly important in interview research conducted by him- or herself. In an early example of this kind of self-reflexivity in discourse analytic work, Moir (1993) notes how the questions asked of students regarding their choice of vocational degree led to analysing the way in which certain answers were not followed up on while others were pursued considerably more. This led to a dual focus on the question-and-answer turns in order to see how “personality-expressive” accounts were favoured over “family influence” accounts. This led to the realisation that the researcher was pursuing accounts of agency in these interviews and the notion of “career choice” as an active decision. Further analysis of the data led to a focus on the ways in which these “decisions” were occasioned discursive constructions. This idea is based on Garfinkel’s (1967) suggestion that retrospective accounting for decisions is a common feature of daily life. He argues that decision-making may have little to do with electing a course

of action on the basis of available information but rather may be the product of people's ability to define the basis for a decision once made. This type of accounting can therefore be viewed as justifying a course of action and involves "the possibility that the person defines retrospectively the decision that have been made" (p. 114). He therefore poses the counterintuitive notion that "the outcome comes before the decision." Therefore, this kind of self-reflexivity enabled an analytical take on the data that eschewed simple reading off what was said by participants as straightforward accounts of their career trajectories.

More recently Salskov et al. (2022) have demonstrated the value of self-reflexivity in their critical discursive psychology work engaging with radical nationalist actors. This research concerns understanding the nature of polarised conflicts around the far-right and the way in which anger is a key feature of them in relation to dialogue in conflictual settings. The analysis undertaken attempts to consider the way discourses around the radical nationalist actors are commonly considered "racist," and how framing such actors as "extremists" can be problematic in obfuscating the way in which such actors are themselves have been socialised within a society. Rather than treating them as "contaminated" in some way or other and fundamentally different from the rest of society, the researchers argue that dialogue with who are considered the morally superior "other" can provoke anger and hateful responses. As the authors conclude: "self-reflexivity requires critically reflecting on one's political, theoretical and methodological commitments and how these may open up or shut down dialogical perspectives." (p. 183).

Conclusion and Future Research

Although qualitative research inquiry enables us to explore and understand unknown phenomena in depth, it is sometimes criticised on the grounds that it is less reliable and has less validity than quantitative research. We suggest that an alternative way of addressing the issue is in thinking about how to simplify the quality criteria of qualitative research in order to better engage researchers across research traditions. A key weakness in methodology research is the practice of making comparisons between qualitative and quantitative quality criteria: it should be recognised that each of these paradigms needs to be evaluated in its own terms. Accordingly, we believe that the quality criteria of qualitative research can be divided into two levels: (1) primary criteria, which will include representativeness, credibility, and confirmability; and (2) secondary criteria, which will include transferability and dependability. Further research will be required to augment the understanding contained in the present study of the effectiveness of primary quality criteria without secondary criteria. Finally, we would also like to draw attention to our position on adopting and openly reflexive stance.

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