Qualitative Research: Determining the Quality of Data

General standards for assessing the quality –accuracy, credibility, and trustworthiness - of qualitative research

Researchers differ a great deal in the language they used to describe the process of assessing the internal validity (accuracy), the external validity (generalizability), and reliability (consistency, replicability) of a qualitative study. Moreover, these terms are typically not used when referring to qualitative research.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to the “trustworthiness” of qualitative research and use terms such as “credibility,” “transferability,” and “dependability,” and “confirmability”. Credibility deals with the accuracy of identifying and describing the subject of the study; transferability deals with the applicability of the findings to another context; dependability is the researcher’s account of the changes inherent in any setting as well as changes to the research design as learning unfolded; and confirmability deals whether the findings could be confirmed by another researcher, thus removing some of the researcher objectivity.

Creswell (2003, 1998) concludes that internal validity is a strength of qualitative research, while reliability and generalizability play a minor role. See Creswell (1998) for a nice overview of perspectives held by other researchers (pg. 200).

Conclusions drawn from the patterns that have emerged from the data must be confirmed or verified to assure they’re real and accurately reflect participants’ views of reality (Berg, 2001). Creswell (2003) emphasizes the need for the researcher to convey in his or her research proposal the steps used to check for the accuracy and credibility of findings. In this section, I will address the general standards for assessing the quality –accuracy, credibility, and trustworthiness - of qualitative research. However, it is important for you to also review the standards used within your chosen research strategy.

1) **Verification, rather than internal validity.** Are findings accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participants, or the readers of an account?
   a) **Triangulation of data:** The researcher makes use of multiple and different sources, methods, and evidence to form themes or categories and to corroborate findings.
   b) **Member checks:** The researcher takes descriptions, interpretations, and findings back to participants to determine accuracy.
   c) **Rich, thick description:** The researcher provides rich, thick description to help place the reader in the context. This should include a description of the setting, participants, processes, and interactions. Also includes a detailed description of the research methods: strategy of inquiry used; the researcher’s role; sampling; data collection; procedures for recording, storing, and managing information; data analysis steps, including coding, interpretations, validation, and data presentation.
   d) **Clarification of researcher stance and preparation:** The researcher provides clarification of assumptions, beliefs, and biases, early in the study, that may have shaped inquiry. These assumptions are bracketed and then set aside as the study progresses.
   e) **Negative or discrepant information:** Search for information that runs counter to themes.
   f) **Prolonged time in the field:** Prolonged time in the field and persistent engagement with participants allows the researcher to develop trusting relationships, to develop a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study and convey detail about the site and the people, and to clarify misunderstandings.
   g) **Collaborations:** of peers, using external auditor and peer debriefing
i) **External auditor:** Use an auditor, external to the study, to examine the process (research steps, decisions, activities) and product (narrative accounts, conclusions) of the study to determine its accuracy. This person may provide an assessment of the project throughout the research process or at the conclusion of the study.

ii) **Peer debriefing:** Have a peer, who is familiar with the study or phenomenon being studied, review the data and research process. A peer reviewer provides support, but also challenges the researcher by asking questions about the researcher’s assumptions, methods, and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, cited in Creswell & Miller, 2000).

2) **Transferability, rather than generalizability:** Lincoln and Guba propose that it is up to the reader, rather than the original investigator, to determine if the findings can be transferred or applied to another setting.
   a) **Rich, thick description:** The researcher provides rich, thick description to help place the reader in the context, and to allow the reader to determine if findings are transferable.
   b) **Triangulation:** Designing a study in which multiple informants and multiple data collection methods are used can strengthen the study’s usefulness for other settings.
   c) **Use peer debriefing:** Process involves locating a person who reviews and asks questions about the study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher.

3) **Dependability** (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Dependability can be thought of as the researcher’s account of the changes inherent in any setting as well as changes to the research design as learning unfolded. Qualitative researchers acknowledge that reality is socially constructed and continually changing, and the dependability comes from capturing the changing conditions that occur in the setting and the study design in response to this reality.

4) **Confirmability** (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Confirmability deals with whether another researcher outside of the study could independently confirm the findings. Critics of qualitative research claim that qualitative research is inherently biased and subjective. Proponents of qualitative research believe that researcher subjectivity is a strength of qualitative research as it allows the researcher to build rapport with and empathy for participants as the researcher immerses him or herself in the setting to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants’ worldview. The researcher’s insights increase the likelihood that she or her will be able to describe the complex social system being studied. However, the researcher needs to build in checks to control for bias in interpretation. These checks include:
   a) **Interpretation bias checks**
      i) Search for negative or discrepant information.
      ii) Check and recheck data and search for rival hypotheses.
      iii) Bracket researcher assumptions, personal values and beliefs.
      iv) Conduct an audit of the data collection and analytic strategies