Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Studies

Excerpted from Simon, M. K. (2011). Dissertation and scholarly research: Recipes for success (2011 Ed.). Seattle, WA, Dissertation Success, LLC.

Find this and many other dissertations guides and resources at
http://dissertationrecipes.com/

Validity and reliability must be addressed in all studies. The accuracy, dependability, and credibility of the information depend on it. In quantitative research, reliability refers to the ability to replicate the results of a study. In qualitative research, there's no expectation of replication. It is common to see the terms quality, rigor or trustworthiness instead of validity, and dependability, instead of reliability in qualitative studies (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mishler, 2000; Seale, 1999; Stenbacka, 2001).

There are various approaches a researcher can use to address validity (quality/rigor/trustworthiness) and reliability (dependability), in qualitative studies, the most popular include: triangulation of information among different sources of data, receiving feedback from informants (member checking), and expert review. Member checking is the process of verifying information with the targeted group. It allows the stakeholder or participant the chance to correct errors of fact or errors of interpretation. Member checks add to the validity of the observer's interpretation of qualitative observations. When discussing the credulity of the data obtained in your dissertation make certain that you describe, in detail, how the results of the member check altered (or not) the data.

Expert review is one of the primary evaluation strategies used in both formative (How can this study be improved?) and summative (How the data helped answer the research questions?). It is a good idea to provide experts with some sort of instrument or guide to ensure that they critique all of the important aspects of the study to be reviewed), such as the interview questions (check out the rubric on expert validation at: http://dissertationrecipes.com) or the archival documents obtained. Qualitative software such as NVivo and AtlasTi can also help assure accuracy.

Creswell (2000) provides an example of a justification that can be used to assure the reader of the rigor of a qualitative study. A slightly modified version is:

> The intent of this qualitative research is to understand [a particular social situation, event, role, group, or interaction]. This involves an investigative process where the researcher gradually makes sense of a social phenomenon by contrasting, comparing, replicating, cataloging and classifying [the object of study]. . . . The researcher (will) enter the informant's world and through ongoing interaction, analyze informants' perspectives and meanings.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that the qualitative researcher also use: credibility criterion and persistent observation if appropriate. Credibility criterion is similar to internal validity, with the focus of establishing a match between the responses of the experts (e.g., teachers, administrators, and parents in an educational study) and those realities represented by the evaluator and designer of the instrument (the researcher and the research in the study). Persistent observation requires sufficient observation to enable the evaluator to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the issue pursued and to focus on the details.

It is important that the number of participants in a qualitative study reach a point of sufficiency. This is achieved when a representative number of participants that are typical of demographics such as age, race, experience, and gender, or who have experienced a phenomenon or treatment, are selected (Smith, 2003). In qualitative studies, there is an ongoing process of categorizing during the data analysis process. The researcher should document how initial codes lead to more elaborate codes and linkages and finally to formal data analysis. The analysis should continue until theoretical saturation is achieved, that is, when no new themes or issues arise regarding a category of data and when the categories are well established and validated.

Note: When reporting your results in a phenomenological study, you can present your findings as themes that reflect the descriptions of the participants' experience. Label and define the themes that are revealed, with examples of narratives that illustrate each theme. You may wish to directly quote from the narratives for each theme to illustrate it.

Make certain that you inform the reader of the number of pages in transcribed texts. Usually there are at least 100 pages of transcribed texts from participant interviews.

References

Creswell, J. W. & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into Practice, 39*(3), 124-131.

Davies, D., & Dodd, J. (2002). Qualitative research and the question of rigor. *Qualitative Health research, 12*(2), 279-289.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Seale, C. (1999). Quality in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 5*(4), 465-478.

Smith, J. (2003). Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods. London: Sage Publications.

Stenbacka, C. (2001). Qualitative research requires quality concepts of its own. *Management Decision, 39*(7), 551-555.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Wainer, H., & Braun, H. I. (1988). *Test validity*. Hilldale, NJ: Lawrence