Cresswell, J. (2016). *30 essential skills for the qualitative researcher.* Los Angeles : Sage.

Implementing Validity Checks

Skill

Use multiple validity checks in your qualitative project.

Why the Skill Is Important

Unquestionably, qualitative research is "interpretive" research, where the inquirer makes a personal interpretation of information. With open-ended research questions, and the generation of text data, the researcher needs to make sense of the data, and to code and provide code labels that seem to characterize the text of information. Alternatively, a researcher may read through a document and assign codes or examine field notes taken during an observation and again assign codes. Because the process of asking questions and analyzing the data requires a personal interpretation, the qualitative researcher needs to pay close attention to validating the findings. Often people will trust the conclusions of a study if they know that the results are accurate and resonate with the participants in a study. In this way, qualitative research becomes more than simply the personal interpretation of the author.

What Is Validity in Qualitative Research?

In *quantitative research*, validity means that good underlying measures are gathered (i.e., construct validity), that the measures represent a good sampling of measures from the universe of possibilities (i.e., content validity), that the information has statistical use (i.e. statistical conclusion validity) and practical use (i.e., consequential validity), that inferences drawn are meaningful (i.e., construct validity), and that results can be generalized to other settings and populations (i.e., external validity). In quantitative research, validity is a centerpiece of doing good, rigorous research. In *qualitative research*, on the other hand, validity means something different. In short, it means that the findings are accurate (or are plausible). You can assess this accuracy through the eyes of the researcher, through the views of participants, and by readers and reviewers of studies (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Over the years, a number of qualitative validity lenses have developed, such as Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Others advance terms such as *ironic validity* (Lather, 1993, p. 21). Richardson (1994) likened validity to a prism in which the crystals reflect external light as well as refract within themselves. In brief, validity has multiple perspectives. Novice researchers can understandably be lost in all of the terms and approaches that have surfaced in recent years.

Types of Validity in Qualitative Research

Amid these perspectives, the stance I have taken (and it still seems to hold) is that validity lenses (i.e., researcher, participants, readers, and reviewers) differ depending on the philosophical orientation of the researcher. I think of validity as establishing the accuracy of the account. If researchers are more postpositivist, they will engage in more systematic and rigorous approaches, such as triangulation, member checking, and auditing. Individuals with more of a constructivist orientation will use disconfirming evidence, prolonged engagement, and thick, rich description. Those inquirers taking a more participatory or critical perspective will embrace research reflexivity, collaboration, and peer debriefing. These validity procedures arrayed against worldview or paradigm assumptions are shown in Table 22.1.

Use multiple validity strategies to assess the accuracy of you interpretations.

The Researcher's Lens

Researchers check the accuracy of a qualitative account. *Triangulation* refers to building evidence from different sources to establish the themes in a study. The term comes from military navigation at sea, where sailors drew on different sources or points of information to determine their ship's bearing. These sources can be from different sources of information (Denzin, 1978), such as from interview transcriptions and typed field notes. The sources can also be from different individuals providing interview information. It can also be from different investigators and from different theories. In qualitative research, triangulation naturally occurs during the process of coding, in which the inquirer looks across different sources of information, such as documents, and finds evidence for themes.

TABLE 22.1 Different Lenses and Philosophical Assumptions in Qualitative Research

Philosophical Assumption and Lens	Postpositivist or Systematic Assumptions	Constructivist Assumptions	Critical/Participatory Assumptions
Researcher	Triangulation	Disconfirming evidence	Researcher reflexivity
Study participants	Member checking	Prolonged engagement in the field	Collaboration with participants
Report readers and reviewers	External audit	Thick, rich description	Peer debriefing

Source: Adapted from Creswell and Miller (2000, p. 126).

The researcher may also look for *disconfirming evidence*. The process involves having the researcher first establish a theme, and then look through all of the evidence for exceptions to this theme. This is evidence that presents an alternative explanation for a theme. It should not overwhelm the theme (or the theme may not work), but it adds an exception to the body of evidence that provides support for the theme. The importance of disconfirming evidence is that it helps establish a realistic (and accurate) picture of the theme. Evidence for a theme is more realistic because typically all evidence does not point toward a theme—there is usually some information that suggests a contrary picture of the theme. In practice, the qualitative researcher writes the disconfirming evidence into a theme passage as a minor part of the theme passage.

Researchers can also reflect on how their experiences and backgrounds have an impact on shaping their accounts. By sharing these biases and beliefs, the accounts become more accurate. This is called *reflexivity*, and I devote an entire chapter to it (Chapter 26). At this point, however, we need to acknowledge that a qualitative account becomes more valid if we know the biases and beliefs the researcher brings to the study and how these biases and beliefs shape the researcher's interpretation. This account can be written into a methods section, typically in a passage headed "role of the researcher."

The Participants' Lens

Another important validity check can come from the participants in the study—the individuals being studied. One approach to learning about the participants' views is through *member checking*. Member checking is when the researcher takes back to participants their themes or entire stories and asks the participants whether the themes or stories are an accurate representation of what they said. The information taken back, thus, is not the interview transcriptions or the field notes, but rather broader summary statements about the data, such as the themes or the discussion of the overall story. The way the researcher can use this strategy is typically through a focus group led by the researcher, who asks open-ended questions to determine if the themes or stories are accurate. One-on-one interviews may also be conducted. Regardless of the method, the questions can focus on whether the account is accurate, what themes are missing, and what participants disagree with. If the account is not found to be accurate, then the researcher revises the themes to better portray the views of the participants.

Another way to learn if the account is accurate with participants is to use extended or *prolonged engagement in the field*. The idea here is that the more time the researcher spends in the field, the more accurate will be the inquirer's account. How much time will vary from study to study, but if the researcher has the opportunity to spend several months in the setting being studied, the codes, themes, quotations, and overall storyline will be enhanced. There is no magical amount of time for involvement in the field, and the time may depend on the researcher's time, the amount of time allowed by participants, and financial and scheduling factors. In the methods discussion, qualitative researchers often report on the extent of their data collection and especially on the amount of time they spend with participants. Staying in the field for a lengthy time provides an opportunity to check codes, themes, and the story with participants and to modify them, if needed.

In much qualitative research, the investigators check in with participants and involve them in key decisions in the research process. Thus, another strategy to help establish the accuracy of a study is to *collaborate with participants*. This collaboration can stretch from minimum involvement to extensive involvement in all phases of the research process. The idea is to build support for the study and the use of its findings. Collaboration may include asking participants to help form the research questions to be asked of people, assisting in the analysis of the text or image data, or reflecting on the findings and forming recommendations for action. At a more formal level, this collaboration may be called "community-based participatory research" or involving the participants as "co-researchers" in a project.

The Readers' or Reviewers' Lens

A final form of validity comes from when a reviewer or reader feels that the qualitative account is accurate. A qualitative inquirer may hire someone to conduct an external audit of all aspects of a project, thus providing an "outside" review of the accuracy of the study. In Chapter 24, attention will be paid to the process of conducting an audit. But for purposes of this discussion, validity is enhanced when someone outside of a project looks closely at it and helps determine that the information is accurate and that the study is done in a rigorous way. The way this works is for the researcher to hire an individual to conduct an audit of the entire project. This external auditor reviews all materials from the study, from the design of the project

to the final results. After concluding this audit, the auditor compiles a report of the accuracy of the study, and this report may be filed (e.g., in an appendix in a dissertation) for others to review.

Also provided for the reader is a detailed, *rich description* of the setting, the people, and the themes in a qualitative report. This discussion has the effect of transporting readers into an actual setting, where they can smell, feel, and hear people. This transporting provides an accurately felt rendering of a study. Thick, rich description is an element of good writing style in qualitative research, and it will be covered more extensively in Chapter 27 on the literary elements of research. We see these rich descriptions when the author provides a small slice of interaction, discusses the settings of the action, or brings interactions among two or more people through dialogue or quotes. This level of detail helps readers actually experience the central phenomenon the researcher is exploring.

Also, for readers and reviewers, we compile our qualitative reports and then have individuals familiar with the subject area or qualitative researchers examine our accounts. *Peer debriefing* is a final strategy that can be used in a study. A peer review or debriefing is the review of a project by someone who is familiar with the research or the central phenomenon being explored. This peer can provide support, play devil's advocate, play challenger, and help refine the study. The peer can ask hard questions and realize that given his or her role as a peer, you might be accommodating of criticism. In practice, these peers may be fellow students or researchers. They may be individuals just like the participants in the study. These peers then write a report summarizing both the strengths and the potential weaknesses of a study so that the researcher can improve the project.

What Validity Strategies Should You Use?

I have reviewed eight different validity strategies and provided names for them so that they can be easily cited. As a general rule, I recommend using two or three strategies in a qualitative project, and you might consider first implementing the easy strategies to conduct and then incorporating, if possible, the more difficult time-consuming procedures. The easy ones to conduct would be triangulation of different data sources, conducting a member-checking analysis by forming a focus group, finding the resources to spend prolonged time in the field and reporting this extensive time, searching for negative case evidence to put into your theme discussion, providing a detailed description of your themes so that the reader is transported to your study site, and clarifying your own personal biases through a passage on reflexivity. More difficult to conduct—and involving other people—would be peer auditing, external auditing, and obviously collaborating with participants. These involve the time, the possible expense, and the expertise of others, adding to the labor involved in conducting qualitative research.

SUMMARY

Many types of qualitative validity exist, and they often present a confusing array of terms and meanings. My approach is that qualitative researchers do need to establish the accuracy (or validity) of their accounts, and that they can do this by using multiple strategies in their projects. These strategies can take different lenses: that of the researcher, the study participants, or the audience for the study.

Researchers could triangulate information, check their reports with participants (i.e., member checking), spend a lengthy time in the field gathering data, report disconfirming evidence for themes, write detailed descriptions of the setting or themes, and clarify their biases in interpretations through reflexivity. They can also conduct more labor-intensive strategies, such as engaging a peer in an audit or having a person outside their project conduct an external audit.

ACTIVITY

Select one of the forms of validity and indicate how it would be implemented in your project.

Discuss what the validity assessment entails, how it would be conducted, what it would bring to your project, and how it might be accepted by study participants.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Often researchers turn to the traditional perspectives on validity established by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These involve credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. An article that addresses these criteria is the following:

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information, 22*(2), 63–75.

Also you might look at the article by Creswell and Miller (2000) in which the typology of worldview by lens for validity is discussed in some detail:

Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative research. *Theory Into Practice, 39*(3), 124–130. doi:10.1207/s15430421tip3903_2

Visit study.sagepub.com/30skills for quizzes, eFlashcards, and more!