

Strategies for Establishing Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

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AS EVIDENCED BY the recently published qualitative studies related to athletic therapy, qualitative research has become a more prominent and accepted research paradigm. Qualitative research often seeks a depth of information and attempts to gain understanding and insight related to the meaning that individuals give to their experiences. This differs from quantitative research, which often seeks to measure one objective truth by collecting an aggregate of measurable data. Moreover, qualitative research is subjective and contextual, whereas quantitative research is objective and generalizable.¹ For this reason, qualitative researchers commonly use interviews and observations to collect data. Like traditional forms of research, however, issues of quality are a concern for both qualitative researchers and practitioners.

Because of the differences between qualitative and quantitative research methods, the traditional quality criteria of reliability and validity used with quantitative methods might be inappropriate for use with qualitative methods.¹ In fact, qualitative researchers tend to use different terminology related to producing a “trustworthy” study. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of strategies to ensure trustworthiness with qualitative research. To explicate how the various strategies of qualitative research differ from those quantitative studies, I will first relate them to the traditional concepts of reliability and validity but then describe how they differ.

Internal Validity

Internal validity is traditionally related to whether an instrument measures what a researcher intended it to measure. With a qualitative study, the researcher who conducts interviews and observations is the research instrument and is extremely sensitive to the context (i.e., people, place, and environment) in which data are collected. Many qualitative researchers tend to use the term *credibility*² instead of *internal validity*. Credibility is related to whether the research findings capture what is really occurring in the context and whether the researcher learned what he or she intended to learn.³

There are several strategies to establish credibility, including triangulation, member checks, and peer review. Triangulation takes many forms but involves collecting data from multiple and varying sources and using multiple analysts or even multiple data-collection strategies (i.e., both interviews and observations). The fundamental idea of using triangulation is to cross-check information or findings to ensure that a full and accurate understanding of a phenomenon is obtained. Member checks involve providing the study’s participants with the data or interpretations of the results so that they can verify their accuracy based on their experiences. A peer review entails having an external qualified researcher examine the research processes and data interpretations. The peer reviewer verifies that the data were collected and analyzed in an appro-

prate and systematic manner and, in many instances, that reasonable conclusions were drawn.

External Validity

External validity is traditionally related to the generalizability of a study's results. Because qualitative researchers seek a depth rather than a breadth of information and insight and understanding about a specific context, qualitative researchers do not often concern themselves with generalizability. Qualitative researchers instead tend to use the term *transferability*.² Transferability is related to whether the findings are germane to similar contexts.

To deal with transferability, qualitative researchers attempt to provide readers with rich, descriptive information about a context or participants so that they can determine for themselves whether the results speak to their situation or experience. Because many journals attempt to provide readers with clear, concise information, the use of rich, thick, descriptive information is often limited. Thankfully, researchers can also pay attention to the design of the study to help ensure transferability. A multisite design is one strategy that requires researchers to obtain data from many different settings. For example, a researcher who was interested in understanding how injured athletes used family social support to aid the rehabilitation and recovery process would attempt to collect data from athletes participating in many settings such as varying college levels, high school, and perhaps even the professional ranks. Analyzing data from multiple settings and finding common themes among them would suggest to many readers that the findings are indeed applicable to their environment.

Reliability

From a traditional perspective, reliability relates to the consistency of the research findings, or whether the findings of a study can be reproduced. This perspective tends to assume that a concept or phenomenon under investigation will not change or be altered. If, for example, a researcher needed to measure force production of a given muscle, the instrument should yield consistent measures from one trial to the next. Because qualitative researchers are interested in the

meaning that individuals give to their experiences, and because human behavior is rarely, if ever, static in nature,³ the concept of reliability is problematic. Qualitative researchers therefore often use the term *dependability*, which is based not on whether particular findings can be reproduced by another researcher but rather whether they are reasonable based on the data collected.

My experience has revealed that the dependability of a study can be verified using member checks. As mentioned previously, a member check allows an actual participant to clarify to the researcher that the researcher's descriptions and interpretations are accurate based on the information the participant provided. If a researcher takes the time to share the participant's data with him or her and explain how it contributed to the overall findings, this can be reasonably used as a strategy to establish dependability. The dependability of a study can also be facilitated with several other strategies. Commonly used and documented procedures include clarifying the researcher's perspective,³ triangulation, or documenting the data-collection and -analysis decisions as a study progressed. Because the researchers are the data-collection and -analysis "instruments," they should share their perspectives and biases related to the phenomenon or situation being analyzed. For this reason, many qualitative researchers share their theoretic framework or general assumptions about the topic. Ultimately, sharing this information helps readers understand how findings emerge from data. Triangulation ensures that information is corroborated. When this is done, researchers can then share data from more than one source with readers and demonstrate a level of dependability.

Qualitative research is often exploratory, and researchers need a level of flexibility related to whom they will interview, where they will interview, what they will observe, and for how long they will observe. That is, qualitative researchers are sometimes not able to predict where the best and most useful information will come from when they initiate a study. Researchers should therefore track the decisions they make about their data collection and analysis in the form of an audit trail. An audit trail might document why particular people were interviewed, what sort of information the interviews yielded, how that information seems to be related to other information, and whether the information corroborates previously collected