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Validation of Qualitative Research in the “Real World”

Priscilla M. Pyett

In this article, the author takes up the debate about the usefulness of the concept of validity in qualitative research and acknowledges the critical role of the researcher as an “instrument” in the research process. Qualitative research, and the process of analysis in particular, involves continuous reflexivity and self-scrutiny. Balancing the need for creativity and rigor, the qualitative researcher can experience uncertainty, particularly in relation to small numbers. The author describes steps that she and a colleague took to ensure the validity and accuracy of the findings in a qualitative study of female sex workers. She discusses specific challenges in relation to the validity of their interpretation and describes two unexpected and serendipitous validity checks that served as affirmation.

Keywords: research; methods; validity; analysis

The relevance and usefulness of the concept of validity in qualitative research has frequently been debated in this and other journals (Angen, 2000; Hammersley, 1987; Maxwell, 1992; Morse, 1999; Sparkes, 2001; Wainwright, 1997; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001; Winter, 2000). Although in quantitative research, validity is related to accuracy, relevance, and reliability of measurement, in qualitative research, we seek not to measure but rather to understand, represent, or explain something, usually some fairly complex social phenomenon. Although the concept of validity does not sit well in the qualitative research paradigm, originating as it does in the positivist tradition (Denzin, 1989; Hammersley, 1992; Seale, 1999; Wainwright, 1997), many qualitative researchers continue to support its relevance (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 1999; Wainwright, 1997; Whittemore et al., 2001). Clearly, the terrain remains contested (Sparkes, 2001). In qualitative research, an account is valid “if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise” (Hammersley, 1987, p. 69). We as qualitative researchers need to ask ourselves this question: How can we have confidence that our account is an accurate representation?

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HOW DO WE ACHIEVE VALID QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS?

As Patton (1990) has observed, there are no “straightforward tests” for making sure that qualitative research is reliable and valid, but “this does not mean that there are no guidelines” (p. 372). Indeed, not only Patton but also scholars such as Denzin, Lincoln, and Guba have developed extensive criteria for demonstrating the rigor, legitimacy, and trustworthiness of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In an ever-increasing number of textbooks, guidelines for qualitative researchers recommend rigor in sampling, data collection, and analysis; triangulation of data sources, methods, investigators, and theories; the need to search for negative cases; and the use of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) and detailed reporting in writing up our accounts. Qualitative researchers are also advised to adopt strategies of honesty, openness, and reflexivity (Hagey, 1997; Marshall, 1990). However, the specific processes that researchers actually undertake to achieve validity in qualitative research are rarely described in the literature.

Qualitative research, and the process of analysis in particular, involves continuous reflexivity and self-scrutiny. Reflexivity has been described as encompassing “continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself” (Finlay, 2002, p. 532). In the process of analysis, our initial interpretations are tested by further examination and checking, including the examination of our own role in the construction of meaning. Good qualitative researchers know that there is no avoiding the tedious work of returning again and again to the data to check, *Is my interpretation true to the data? Does this apply to other individuals in my study? Was this topic raised in all the interviews?* Reflexivity operates here, as we ask ourselves, *How might my knowledge, position, and experience be shaping my analysis? Reflexivity can include checking our method, our analysis, and our interpretation not only with the academic literature but also with the population we are researching, either by working collaboratively or by having a “critical reference group,”* which should include a range of stakeholders critical to the study (Wadsworth, 1997).

Although the techniques that the researcher has employed to obtain valid findings can be reported, their acceptance by a third party must, as Wainwright (1997) has pointed out, “ultimately entail a degree of trust in the diligence and integrity of the researcher” (p. 13). I would argue that this trust must be earned in the writing-up process, by demonstration of the researcher’s honesty, reflexivity, discipline, and rigor. Readers and consumers of our research should be able to critique our findings in a meaningful way (Whittemore et al., 2001). We therefore need to provide sufficient detail and context for the reader to assess our interpretation and our trustworthiness. We should also acknowledge our theoretical and, where relevant, our political perspective.

THE QUALITY OF THE RESEARCHER

A crucial distinction between “objective” quantitative research and valid qualitative research is accepting that the researcher’s individual attributes and

perspectives have an influence on the research process (Finlay, 2002; Ward-Schofield, 1993; Whittemore et al., 2001). A researcher's theoretical position, interests, and political perspective will affect, if not determine, the research question, the methodological approach, and the analysis and interpretation of data (Hertz, 1997). Although this is also true of quantitative research, where it is unstated or hidden, in qualitative research, it is acknowledged and even celebrated. As Ward-Schofield (1993) has pointed out, in qualitative research, the goal is

not to produce a standard set of results that any other careful researcher in the same situation or studying the same situation would have produced. Rather it is to produce a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with detailed study of the situation. (p. 202)

Thus, qualitative research depends, at every stage, and particularly for its validity (Reason, 1981), on the skills, training, insights, and capabilities of the researcher (Patton, 1990). This means, as Patton has reminded us, that "the human factor is the great strength and the fundamental weakness of qualitative inquiry and analysis" (p. 372). As a trained, qualified, and experienced qualitative researcher, I aim for research findings that will be valid—for the participants and for the reader—so I follow the guidelines and rely on my training and experience. However, even strict adherence to methodological rigor will not guarantee validity or trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Whittemore et al., 2001). Qualitative research is often characterized by uncertainty and flexibility (Lincoln, 1995), by a tension between rigor and creativity (Patton, 1990; Whittemore et al., 2001), and, as I have argued elsewhere (Pyett, 2001), by the need for critical compromises. When, as in every qualitative research project I have undertaken, I question my own practice, I would dearly love to have recourse to some test of reliability or validity. The ultimate way for qualitative researchers to find out whether their findings are valid would be to test them in the real world, but this is rarely possible.

HOW DO I HAVE CONFIDENCE?

In a qualitative study of the health and risk behaviors of female sex workers (see Pyett & Warr, 1997; Warr & Pyett, 1999), these are the steps that a colleague and I took to ensure that our findings would be valid. Our access to the field was by invitation, and I had already earned the trust of the sex worker community through an earlier research collaboration (Pyett, Haste, & Snow, 1996). The research question was derived from this earlier research with the same population group. Working in collaboration with a sex worker rights organization, we established a critical reference group with eight women, each of whom had some association with the sex industry, either as current or past sex workers or as health educators or outreach workers in the field. As noted in a detailed report of this study, "the diversity of experience which these eight women brought to the research process was important in guarding against interviewer bias and against the privileging of any one type of information or any one analytical perspective" (Warr & Pyett, 1999, p. 293). The criteria for participants' eligibility in the study, the sampling framework, the recruiting strategy, and the interview questions were developed with the critical reference group. We applied triangulation to recruitment, interviewing, and coding. Our

recourse to member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was limited, because we had promised the participants complete anonymity, and follow-up would therefore have been almost impossible. However, we checked the initial analysis and interpretation not only with the critical reference group but also with the sex worker organization and the two welfare agencies that had assisted with recruitment. In a plain-language report to the community (Pyett & Warr, 1996) and each of three academic articles (Pyett & Warr, 1997, 1999; Warr & Pyett, 1999), the write-up contains sufficient detail and reflexivity for the reader to assess whether the findings are valid.

Nevertheless, there were moments when I questioned my own practice, particularly in relation to the interpretations we drew from some of the data.

MULTIPLE REALITIES

As postmodern qualitative researchers, we acknowledge that there are multiple realities. In research on sex workers, these might include the realities of the welfare worker at the drop-in centre, the doctor or nurse at the STD clinic, the sex worker, her mother, and the feminist sociologist, each of whom would have a very different perspective on our research question, What are the critical health issues for women in sex work?

Which or whose reality did I want to represent? Winter (2000) raised the question of the extent to which the researcher is obliged to respect the perspectives of the actors in the situation for an account to be valid and how important it is that the participants confirm or be able to recognize the findings, particularly if they might be disadvantaged by the results. Morse (1999) disputed the idea that the participant has more analytic authority than the researcher. These were very pertinent concerns in our study. I would argue that as researchers, we must respect but not necessarily agree with the actors or research participants. Even the most basic psychology teaches us that individuals do not always understand their own actions or motives. Because, as social researchers, we have access to other data, research findings, theories, and understandings of similar or contrasting situations, we have a capacity and an academic obligation to apply our critical understandings to the accounts given by participants.

This is not to imply that the researcher's interpretation is more valid than the participant's; rather, they are different and possibly both valid perspectives and understandings of the situation. As a researcher, I felt it was my responsibility to assess and explain the participants' understandings of their social world. I wanted the perspective of the sex workers to be understood, but I wanted to represent the sex workers' perspective through my respectful and sympathetic feminist analysis.

Analyzing interview data involves critical assessment and interpretation of the participants' narratives and understandings of their lived experience. It is not enough to accept everything the participants say without subjecting it to more detailed examination of the circumstances, structures, and constraints that have contributed to the formation of their worldviews. The researcher's task is not to distinguish between reliable and unreliable informants but to apply sociological theory, together with additional historical and contextual information, to develop an understanding that reaches beyond the perspective of the participants. The theoretical insights that the researcher brings to the interpretation should be not only of

academic interest but also, he or she hopes, ultimately of benefit to the participants or their community.

As qualitative researchers, we gain confidence in our interpretation of the data “as one account confirms another, stories accrete, and regularities emerge, so it becomes less likely that individual narratives are the product of one person’s fancy and more likely that they show structural features in the lives of the subjects” (Booth & Booth, 1994, p. 421). However, we can be challenged when we have very small numbers, such as in our study of sex workers, where we identified two categories with only 2 participants.

THE NUMBERS GAME

In assessing the validity of qualitative research, as Silverman (1985) has pointed out, a critical reader can be “forced to ponder whether the researcher has selected only those fragments of data which support his [*sic*] argument” (p. 140). In line with Silverman’s solution, which is to count the number of respondents who refer to a specific theme, considerable pressure is often applied to qualitative researchers to account for the validity of findings by reporting numbers. However, there is no way of determining how many participants must share a point of view for it to be validated. Furthermore, as Wainwright (1997) has pointed out, even a view shared by the majority of respondents in a small qualitative study cannot claim to be representative of the broader population. Counting responses misses the point of qualitative analysis:

The rationale for conducting in-depth interviews is that people involved in a phenomenon may have insights that would not otherwise be available to the researcher, and it is the quality of the insight that is important, rather than the number of respondents that share it. (p. 11).

Nevertheless, 2 remains a very small number.

Greenwood and Levin (1998) have argued that individual cases and stories have “immense power to alter theories” because viable theories cannot sustain exceptions, and any individual case that contradicts a general social theory “thereby invalidates that theory and requires that a new theory be developed to take account of the case” (p. 81). It seems to me that for an individual case, or a small number of cases, to challenge existing theory or provide new insight calls for even higher standards of rigor and reflexivity.

CHECKING THE VALIDITY OF ONLY TWO CASES

I have outlined the steps we took to enhance the validity of our findings. How valid the findings are might be confined to the circumstances, the population group studied, and the context of the study. However, they might also be generalizable to other similar situations, populations, and contexts. With input from the critical reference group at all stages of the research process, we were fairly confident that our analysis was valid for the group of sex workers we had interviewed. We also knew from the academic literature that similar findings had been reported elsewhere, but we wanted to make some claims that were original and differed from other

researchers' findings. We submitted the findings to peer review, which offers a form of validation by an academic audience. We were therefore gratified and reassured when reports of the study were accepted for publication in three internationally reviewed journals (Pyett & Warr, 1997, 1999; Warr & Pyett, 1999). However, I still had some vestiges of uncertainty. I was, therefore, surprised and pleased to have two unexpected and serendipitous real-world checks that provided additional confirmation that our findings were valid.

Example 1: The Private Relationships of Two Sex Workers

Research on female sex workers in Western societies has repeatedly found that the women rarely use condoms with their boyfriends because condoms are associated with work and represent a real barrier to intimacy in private relationships (Campbell, 1991; Day & Ward, 1990; Dorfman, Derish, & Cohen, 1992; Estebanez, Fitch, & Najera, 1993; McKeganey & Barnard, 1992; Vanwesenbeeck, de Graaf, van Zessen, Straver, & Visser, 1993). Non-use of condoms with their private partners can pose significant risks of sexually transmissible diseases (STDs), including HIV, for the women (Campbell, 1995; Scambler & Scambler, 1995), particularly if their partner is engaging in unprotected sex with other women (Day & Ward, 1990) or when either partner is involved in injecting drug use (Harcourt & Philpot, 1990; Matthews, 1990).

The women in our study were no different: Although 8 of the sex workers reported that they had contracted an STD from a private partner, only 2 women reported regular use of condoms with their boyfriends. We wanted to understand more about the women's private relationships and why they knowingly exposed themselves to risk. Among the 24 women in our study, we identified 3 attitudes toward private relationships (Warr & Pyett, 1999). One group of women had decided they could not have a relationship while they were engaged in sex work, whereas a second group struggled with the many tensions and difficulties they regarded as inevitably associated with maintaining a relationship while continuing as sex workers. Women in both groups cited problems such as loss of their partner's respect, their partner's jealousy of their clients, and their partner's failure to understand their own needs for emotional rather than physical intimacy.

Contrasting with the difficulties reported by these women were the attitudes of two women who expressed considerable optimism and confidence in love and romance. Both had developed relationships with men they had met as clients—a taboo for most sex workers. This is how Linda (all names are pseudonyms), a street worker, described meeting her boyfriend:

I was working one night . . . and he happened to drive past. He was on his way home . . . and he said he noticed me and he came around, back around and went around the block, and there was about eight cars . . . and something just made me take notice of him and his eyes. I just fell in love with [him] and I got in the car and said to him "You've got beautiful eyes, you know" and I did a job with him and took him down a lane.

Amy met her boyfriend while working in a brothel:

He was sitting out in the reception room . . . and I walked past [him] and thought "Oh wow!" He was just . . . beautiful in his singlet, muscles, and he was just

beautiful—my type of guy. . . . I went back . . . and looked into [his] eyes and he looked into mine and I said “Oh, it’s a pleasure to meet you” . . . and we got into the room—I was only supposed to be there for 45 minutes and we were there for an hour and a half.

We were particularly struck by the similarity between these stereotypically romantic episodes. The accounts given by these two women were the most difficult to analyze but also the most interesting, shedding new light on the conflict experienced by all the sex workers in this study. These two women continued to perceive their partners as supportive and caring and were enthusiastic about the possibilities offered by their relationships. However, from their own accounts of their ongoing relationships with these men, the women’s perceptions could be interpreted as romantic and idealistic. Their everyday lives were characterized by isolation and a lack of material or emotional support. Linda described her boyfriend as “fantastic” and “strong,” but their relationship had deteriorated when “he moved back in with his wife,” and she was hurt when he started picking up other “working girls” whom Linda had regarded as her friends. Linda nevertheless demonstrated her commitment to this relationship by not using condoms. Condoms represented a “big barrier” between her and her clients, and only sex without condoms felt like “real” sex. Amy’s story was similar.

We were uncomfortable with the idea of “false consciousness” and also a little uneasy about having only two in this category. However, we were persuaded by the powerful similarities between the two accounts and by our reading of the literature in relation to women in other severely disadvantaged circumstances who had also been found to gain considerable comfort from idealizing and romanticizing the intimacy and closeness of their sexual relationships (Sobo, 1995). Nevertheless, when submitting the findings to further validation by peer review in an international journal, we did not provide, and were not asked for, the number of women in each category.

Later, I was presenting a talk at the local sexual health clinic and found myself rather anxious about how the findings from this qualitative study might be received by an audience of doctors and nurses. Backed up by our recent publication, I decided to take my chances and admit that there were only two women in the category of “idealistically romantic” sex workers. I expected such a small number to alarm this medically trained audience. To my surprise, it was the stories of the two women in this category that were most recognizable and familiar to these clinicians, whose regular patients included many sex workers. The way these women idealized their relationships helped explain the widespread phenomenon of non-use of condoms between sex workers and their private partners.

Example 2: The Street Worker and the Journalist

In the same study, there were two very young women who were working on the street and whom we identified as alarmingly vulnerable because of their passivity and fatalism. Unlike the majority of women in our study, one of the youngest women reported that she allowed the clients to control all aspects of the sexual interaction, including where it took place. This 14-year-old’s only strategy for dealing with her fear of being raped or killed was to “just try and just lay back and relax and stuff, but it’s hard.” The other young woman relied on taking up to 4 prescription

“relaxing pills” at a time to deal with her constant fears of being found “half dead.” Analyzing the 24 women’s “strategies for survival” (Pyett & Warr, 1999), we found the accounts of these two young women particularly poignant and disturbing.

Concerned to raise public awareness of and sympathy for the vulnerability of all the women in our study, we organized a media launch of our community report (Pyett & Warr, 1996). I was interviewed by a journalist who was suspicious and cynical about the study’s findings. He seemed to think we were sensationalizing street work by drawing attention to the youngest workers. Having refused his request to “get him some girls” to interview for his radio show, I suggested that he drive down to the street work precinct to “get his own girl” to interview and make sure he paid her for her time. Imagine my surprise when I heard on early morning radio the next day his interview with a street sex worker he had indeed “picked up” (and, I hope, paid appropriately for her time) and whose answers to his questions verified our study as if she were one of our actual participants. By coincidence, I met the journalist later that morning in a café, and he insisted on telling me how shocked he was when, at the conclusion of his interview, he asked the woman’s age and found out that she was not 23 or 24, as he had expected, and not even 18, but the very same age as his own schoolgirl daughter—a mere 16. This was a powerful lesson to him and a confirming and validating experience for me.

CONCLUSION

Although we could conceivably have included the sexual health clinicians in the process of validating our interpretation and analysis prior to publishing our findings, the journalist’s efforts to challenge our findings could not have been planned. These real-world checks not only helped confirm that our findings and interpretation of the data were valid, they also provided a test of the quality of the most important research instruments that we used in the study: the researchers. The time and effort expended on rigor and reflexivity in this study were rewarded by these real-world endorsements. It is not often that we as qualitative researchers have such an opportunity to have our skills as practitioners affirmed. With health research remaining under the control of those who would prefer that we all play the “numbers game,” such affirmation can be very reassuring.

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