



## Qualitative Research: Validity

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### Abstract:

With the increased interest in qualitative research some questions have arisen regarding methodological issues. In particular sample size and validity are the most often queried aspects of qualitative research. This paper aims to provide a review of the concepts of validity in qualitative research.

**Keywords:** Qualitative research, validity, descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalizability, evaluative validity

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## Introduction

Researchers have a choice of two broad streams of research design that one can use to uncover the intricacies of a given phenomenon; quantitative or qualitative. Data gathered by either quantitative or qualitative methodologies can be used to verify or generate new theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The decision of what research stream one uses lies within the essence of the research question. If the research is seeking to verify an existing set of defined variables of an established theory (see Hom & Kinicki, 2001 – testing job satisfaction on voluntary turnover) or to test defined variables of an untested theory (see Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski & Erez, 2001 – testing the job embeddedness model of employee retention) then quantitative research would provide the appropriate methodology or if the research area is predisposed to numeric quantification (e.g. how many times something occurs over a given timeframe) (Charmaz, 2000, Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). If the aim of the research is exploratory in nature, and seeks to unearth an understanding about an area that little is known about (see Hendry, 2003 – how environmental non-governmental organizations evaluate and target companies) or if the research is attempting to find the meaning of or understand the experience of a given situation to a group of individuals (see Kendra & Taplin, 2004 – how an individual's culture affects project management) then qualitative methodologies would be appropriate (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Symon & Cassell, 1998).

Qualitative research has seen an increased popularity in the last two decades and is becoming widely accepted across most disciplines (e.g. sociology, medicine, business & economics, psychology, anthropology) (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

## Validity

Qualitative research is based on subjective, interpretive and contextual data; whereas quantitative research attempts to control and/or exclude those elements (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Maxwell, 1992, Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thus, the positivist viewpoint of validity and the canons of rigor that are applied to quantitative research are not entirely applicable to qualitative research (Maxwell, 1992, Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To solve the dilemma of the measurement of validity qualitative researchers have developed measurement concepts in line with the qualitative paradigm (Maxwell, 1992; Seale, 2003). Joseph A. Maxwell (1992) developed five categories to judge the validity of qualitative research: descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalizability, and evaluative validity. Although other researchers have also developed various categories; however, Maxwell's five categories offer the most thorough conceptualization. The one exception is Carl Auerbach & Lousie Silverstein's (2003) category of 'transparency'.

'Descriptive validity' refers to the accuracy of the data (Maxwell, 1992). Walsh (2003), and Glaser and Strauss's (1967) 'credibility' captures the same concept. The data must accurately reflect what the participant has said or done. The reporting of the data must also reflect the same accuracy, which means that the transcription is an accurate account of what was said or the transcription of the videotapes portrays the unfolding of events in an accurate manner (1992). Therefore the descriptive validity of a study may be brought into question because of the omission of data. "For, example, a verbatim interview transcript might be descriptively invalid in omitting features of the informant's speech, such as stress and pitch, that are essential to the understanding of the interview" (1992, p. 47). Descriptive validity forms the base on which all the other forms of validity are built upon. Without an accurate account of the formative data all else is irrelevant (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

'Interpretive validity' captures how well the researcher reports the participants' meaning of events, objects and/or behaviours (Maxwell, 1992). The key here is that the interpretations are not based on the researcher's perspective but that of the participant. "Interpretive validity is inherently a matter of inference from the words and actions of participants in the situations studied' (1992, p. 49). For example, if during an interview the participant hits the top of the desk it may be to punctuate a point or it may have been done in anger. For the researcher to assure an accurate evaluation of the act he/she has to look for clues in the transcript (the participant may later refer to it as an act of anger or frustration) or in body language (may have a smile or be laughing). Walsh (2003) terms interpretive validity as 'conformability' and 'justifiability' is the term used by Auerbach & Silverstein (2003).

'Theoretical validity' "goes beyond concrete description and interpretation and explicitly addresses the theoretical constructions that the researcher brings to, or develops during, the study" (Maxwell, 1992, p. 50). What theoretical validity seeks to evaluate is the validity of the researcher's concepts and the theorized relationships among the concepts in context with the phenomena. The question that is asked here is has the researcher provided an accurate explanation of the phenomena? For Auerbach and Silverstein it means "the theoretical constructs must fit together" (2003, p. 85) and they call it 'coherence'. The patterns, concepts, categories, properties, and dimensions must fit together to create the constructs, which must tell the story of the phenomena. For example, if a pattern emerges that highlights a high level of frustration of employees in organizational policies but the researcher theorizes that the high level of frustration is due to a dislike of management. Then the researcher should be able to produce data that supports his/her theory, if not then they have failed to 'fit' the theory to the existing data.

'Generalizability' refers to the ability to apply the theory resulting from the study universally (Auerbach & Silverman, 2003, Maxwell, 1992), which Walsh (2003) puts under the heading of 'transferability'. For qualitative research generalizability is problematic. Qualitative research is concerned with the concepts and idiosyncratic characteristics of a select group; therefore, the findings or theory may only be applicable to a similar group (Auerbach & Silverman, 2003, Maxwell, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As discussed earlier the sampling technique used, theoretical sampling, targets participants that can provide sufficient expertise on the phenomena so that an understanding of the phenomena and the development of theory directly related to the phenomena is achieved (Maxwell, 1992, Strauss and Corbin, 1998). However, theory derived from grounded theory research provides two levels of theory; abstract and specific to the situation (Auerbach & Silverman, 2003). Maxwell (1992) calls the abstract level, external generalizability and the specific to the situation level, internal generalizability. Theory specific to the situation is developed from the repetitive themes and patterns, and may be applicable to similar situations. However, each situation will have unique characteristics which may affect the applicability of the situation specific theory (2003). At the abstract level the theory is more holistic in nature. It deals with the concepts and patterns that can be more widely applied. For example, in a study of the ethical decision-making process of individuals in Chinese accounting firms in China the cultural specific concepts like the affect of collectivism may only be applicable to other Chinese organizations in China. However, the actual holistic process of decision making may be universally applicable (e.g. awareness of problem, evaluation of problem, desire to act, and taking action or not).

'Evaluative validity' moves away from the data itself and tries to assess the evaluations drawn by the researchers (Maxwell, 1992). For example if the researcher studying organization x declared that the employees were wrong about their feelings of frustration regarding management policies or that the employees frustration was a result of societal pressures due to a recession. These claims may be drawn from the researchers own understanding of the situation and not on the data

gathered from employees; thus, failing to meet evaluative validity. However, the problem of how one evaluates the data they receive may raise questions from other researchers regardless of how well grounded in the data the evaluation is and this is also true of the results of other research methods. In fact, these doubts are what drives researchers to provide better research and methods that answer the 'what ifs'.

Auerbach and Silverstein's category of 'transparency' measures how well the researcher informs the reader how they arrived at their interpretation (2003). The reader must understand the researchers the process that was involved in the interpretation; the method of sample selection, the research design, the interview protocol; the coding procedures and the researchers own epistemological viewpoints. Walsh (2003) terms this 'dependability'. How well can the findings be replicated (Walsh, 2003)? Although the findings are sensitive to culture and environment, a researcher should be able to replicate the findings in a similar environment. For example, a study of the ethical decision-making process of individuals in Chinese accounting firms in Beijing should be able to be replicated with similar findings in Shanghai. The purpose here is not to actually replicate the study but to be at that level of understanding of the original researcher's findings. Although the reader may not agree with the interpretation, he or she will have a clear understanding of how the researcher arrived at the interpretation (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Qualitative researchers work from the viewpoint that research findings are the result of an interpretive effort and are not objective but subjective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Walsh, 2003). Qualitative researchers understand that they are part of the research process and thus affect the results. By applying these five categories of validity qualitative researchers and readers can assess the validity of the findings.

## Conclusion

Both qualitative and quantitative paradigms seek the same result; the truth. Therefore both traditions strive to ensure their findings are generated from an appropriate sample size and are valid. Yes, quantitative results provide the researcher with hard facts and figures to validate and generate theory. However, a qualitative analysis uncovers a subjective viewpoint at the very heart of these hard facts and figures. One respondent's four on a Likert scale may not be equivalent to another respondent's four on the same question. When dealing with issues that involve the human thought process that is affected by the beliefs and values of the individual we as researchers must understand that there's more to the answer than a number between one and seven. Qualitative research seeks to provide that understanding. Qualitative and quantitative methods compliment each other. Qualitative research can uncover new theories and variables. Quantitative research can test these new theories and variables. Quantitative research can highlight causal variable in theoretical models and qualitative research can provide the understanding of the detailed operationalization of the variable.

Human beings are indeed a complex system and when coupled with the complexities of business organizations the task of understanding how they interact is a daunting task (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2001). An example of this can be seen in the ongoing research into employee turnover. Although the research has been ongoing for over 50 years and thousands of papers and books have been written, in positivist terms no more than 25% of the variance has been explained (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). Only by utilizing both qualitative and quantitative research methods may researcher be able to uncover, test and verify further variables. However this will mean that the research community put aside the debate on the validity of either paradigm and

accept that there are different ways to gain the truth. Different ways that include the use different sample sizes, but still insist on accurate and meaningful findings that must pass measures of validity. Perhaps it is, as Fornaciari and Dean (2001) call it, time for a 'leap of faith'.

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