



Methods and Meanings: Credibility and Trustworthiness of Qualitative Research

Diane G. Cope, PhD, ARNP, BC, AOCNP®

Historically, qualitative research has been viewed as “soft” science and criticized for lacking scientific rigor compared to quantitative research, which uses experimental, objective methods (Mays & Pope, 1995). Common criticisms are that qualitative research is subjective, anecdotal, subject to researcher bias, and lacking generalizability by producing large quantities of detailed information about a single, unique phenomenon or setting (Koch & Harrington, 1998). However, qualitative research is not inferior research, but a different approach in studying humans. Qualitative research emphasizes exploring individual experiences, describing phenomenon, and developing theory (Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004).

A major challenge for researchers is striving for the highest possible quality when conducting and reporting research. As evidence-based professionals, nurses must be able to assess strengths, limitations, and quality or scientific merit of a study when reviewing the literature. Because quantitative and qualitative research differ in methodologic approach, different criteria exist in regard to critiquing each. The perspectives of quantitative research are rigor and validity, and the perspectives of qualitative research are credibility and trustworthiness. This article will present criteria for evaluating quality in qualitative research as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001); strategies to enhance credibility; and examples used by Pedersen, Hack, McClement, and Taylor-Brown (2013), who explored the patient navigation role from the perspective of young women with breast cancer.

The most common criteria used to evaluate qualitative research are those purported by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

To develop trustworthiness in qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) initially presented four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. In 1994, Guba and Lincoln added a fifth criterion, authenticity.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the truth of the data or the participant views and the interpretation and representation of them by the researcher (Polit & Beck, 2012). Credibility is enhanced by the researcher describing his or her experiences as a researcher and verifying the research findings with the participants. A qualitative study is considered credible if the descriptions of human experience are immediately recognized by individuals that share the same experience (Sandelowski, 1986). To support credibility when reporting a qualitative study, the researcher should demonstrate engagement, methods of observation, and audit trails.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the constancy of the data over similar conditions (Polit & Beck, 2012; Tobin & Begley, 2004). This can be achieved when another researcher concurs with the decision trails at each stage of the research process. Through the researcher’s process and descriptions, a study would be deemed dependable if the study findings were replicated with similar participants in similar conditions (Koch, 2006).

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the researcher’s ability to demonstrate that the data represent the participants’ responses and not the researcher’s biases or viewpoints

(Polit & Beck, 2012; Tobin & Begley, 2004). The researcher can demonstrate confirmability by describing how conclusions and interpretations were established, and exemplifying that the findings were derived directly from the data. In reporting qualitative research, this can be exhibited by providing rich quotes from the participants that depict each emerging theme.

Transferability

Transferability refers to findings that can be applied to other settings or groups (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013; Polit & Beck, 2012). A qualitative study has met this criterion if the results have meaning to individuals not involved in the study and readers can associate the results with their own experiences. Researchers should provide sufficient information on the informants and the research context to enable the reader to assess the findings’ capability of being “fit” or transferable. However, the criterion of transferability is dependent on the aim of the qualitative study and may only be relevant if the intent of the research is to make generalizations about the subject or phenomenon (Sandelowski, 1986).

Authenticity

Authenticity refers to the ability and extent to which the researcher expresses the feelings and emotions of the participant’s experiences in a faithful manner (Polit & Beck, 2012). By reporting in this descriptive approach, readers grasp the essence of the experience through the participant quotes.

Whittemore et al. (2001) proposed primary and secondary validity criteria for critiquing qualitative research. Primary criteria include credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity, with credibility