

# Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods

## Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research

Contributors: John K. Smith

Editors: Michael S. Lewis-Beck & Alan Bryman & Tim Futing Liao

Book Title: Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods

Chapter Title: "Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research"

Pub. Date: 2004

Access Date: October 14, 2013

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9780761923633

Online ISBN: 9781412950589

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589.n846>

Print pages: 958-959

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589.n846>

Among QUALITATIVE RESEARCHERS, the concepts of RELIABILITY and VALIDITY have eluded singular or fixed definitions. As the understanding of qualitative inquiry has evolved in varied ways, especially over the past 20 or so years, so have the understandings of both concepts.

## Reliability

In its original formulation among quantitative researchers, a study was considered reliable if it could be replicated by other researchers. Among qualitative researchers, there is a considerable division of thinking as to whether replication or the possibility of reproducing results has any import whatsoever in terms of judging the value of qualitative studies. Some people, such as Jerome Kirk and Marc Millar (1986), argue that reliability in the sense of repeatability of observations still has an important epistemic role to play in qualitative inquiry. They contend that for a study to be judged good or valid, the observations made in that study must be stable over time, and that different methods, such as interviews and observations, should yield similar results.

Others, most particularly Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1994), have noted that because of the philosophic assumptions underlying qualitative inquiry (e.g., reality is constructed), the concept of reliability should give way to the analog idea of dependability. They contend that replication is not possible for qualitative inquiry; all that can or should be expected from a researcher is a careful account of how she or he obtained and analyzed the data.

Finally, some now hold that there is little point in continuing to pose reliability as a criterion for judging the quality of studies. Although it is possible that one researcher in a particular setting may well repeat the observations and findings of another researcher in that setting, one should not be concerned if this does not happen. The basis for this claim derives from the realization that theory-free observation is impossible, or that researchers can observe the world only from a particular place in that world (Smith & Deemer, 2000). If this is so, then reliability can be given no special epistemic status and need not be an issue of consequence for qualitative researchers.

# Validity

For QUANTITATIVE RESEARCHERS, validity is a concept of major epistemic import. To say that a study is valid is to say that it is a good study in that the researcher has accurately represented the phenomena or reality under consideration. For various related reasons, most particularly the rejection of naive or direct realism and the rejection of an epistemological foundationism, qualitative researchers do not find this definition of validity acceptable. Qualitative researchers have replaced realism and foundationalism with a variety of positions ranging from indirect or subtle realism and epistemological quasifoundationalism (fallibilism) to nonrealism and nonfoundationalism with numerous variations on theme in between (Smith, 1993). Because of this situation, the efforts by qualitative researchers to replace the traditional understanding of validity has led to an almost bewildering array of definitions and variations on definitions for this concept.

Martyn Hammersley (1990) is representative of those who have advanced an understanding of validity based on a subtle or indirect realism, combined with a quasifoundationalism or fallibilist epistemology. For him, a judgment of validity is not a matter of the extent to which an account accurately reproduces reality, but rather a judgment about the extent to which an account is faithful to the particular situation under consideration. This means that even though we have no direct access to reality and our judgments are always fallible, there still can and must be good reasons offered for claiming an account as true. These considerations lead to a definition of a valid study as one whose results have met the tests of plausibility and credibility. The former is a matter of whether or not an account of a situation is likely true given the existing state of knowledge of that situation. The latter directs attention to whether or not [p. 958 ↓ ] a researcher's judgment is accurate given the nature of the phenomena, the circumstances of the research, the characteristics of the researcher, and so on.

A second broad approach, which also is, to one degree or another, based on an indirect realism and a quasifoundationalism, involves a wide variety of what can be called "hyphenated" definitions of validity. Numerous terms, such as *catalytic*, *situated*, *voluptuous*, *transgressive*, *ironic*, and *interrogated*, have been placed as modifiers to

the term *validity*. Both David Altheide and John Johnson (1994) and Patti Lather (1993) have discussed these and various other possibilities.

Finally, some qualitative researchers see little reason to bother with the concept of validity. Because these people have accepted nonrealism and non foundationalism, they see little point in continuing to talk about true accounts of the world or of accurate depictions of an independently existing reality. They claim that all that is available to us are different linguistically mediated social constructions of reality. As such, the most that can be said for validity is that it is a matter of social agreement, and such agreements are not epistemological, but rather political and moral ones (Schwandt, 1996; Smith & Deemer, 2000).

John K. Smith

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589.n846>

#### References

Altheide, D., & Johnson, J. (1994). Criteria for assessing interpretive validity in qualitative research . In N. Denzin, ed. & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (1st ed., pp. 485–499) . Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research . In N. Denzin, ed. & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (1st ed., pp. 105–117) . Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hammersley, M. (1990). *Reading ethnographic research* . London: Longman.

Kirk, J., & Millar, M. (1986). *Reliability and validity in qualitative research* . Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Lather, P. Fertile obsession: Validity after poststructuralism . *Sociological Quarterly* vol. 35 pp. 673–694 (1993).

Schwandt, T. Farewell to criteriology . *Qualitative Inquiry* vol. 2 pp. 58–72 (1996).

Smith, J. (1993). *After the demise of empiricism: The problem of judging social and educational inquiry*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Smith, J., & Deemer, D. (2000). The problem of criteria in the age of relativism . In N. Denzin, ed. & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 877–922) . Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.