

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

Trustworthiness

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In qualitative research, trustworthiness has become an important concept because it allows researchers to describe the virtues of qualitative terms outside of the parameters that are typically applied in quantitative research. Hence, the concepts of generalizability, internal validity, reliability, and objectivity are reconsidered in qualitative terms. These alternative terms include transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. In essence, trustworthiness can be thought of as the ways in which qualitative researchers ensure that transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability are evident in their research. Moving away from the quantitatively oriented terms allows qualitative researchers the freedom to describe their research in ways that highlight the overall rigor of qualitative research without trying to force it into the quantitative model.

To understand the differences between these quantitative and qualitative terms, it is helpful to compare the parallel concepts. To start, transferability and generalizability can be compared. Although generalizability refers to situations where research findings can be applied across the widest possible contexts, transferability reflects the need to be aware of and to describe the scope of one's qualitative study so that its applicability to different contexts (broad or narrow) can be readily discerned. In this way, a study is not deemed unworthy if it cannot be applied to broader contexts; instead, a study's worthiness is determined by how well others can determine (i.e., through a paper trail) to which alternative contexts the findings might be applied.

Credibility and internal validity are also considered to be parallel concepts. A study possesses internal validity if the researchers have successfully measured what they sought to measure. In contrast, a credible study is one where the researchers have accurately and richly described the phenomenon in question. Here, instead of ensuring that one has measured what one set out to measure, one is making sure that they have accurately represented the data.

The next pair to be considered is objectivity and confirmability. In an objective study, the data is considered to be unbiased. Confirmability, on the other hand, reflects the need to ensure that the interpretations and findings match the data. That is, no claims are made that cannot be supported by the data.

Finally, reliability-reproducibility and dependability can also be compared. Findings are considered to be reproducible if they can be replicated exactly when using the same context and procedure. Achieving reproducibility or reliability in this way [p. 896 ↓] can be challenging for the qualitative researcher who studies the constantly changing social world. As a result, dependability becomes a more realistic notion in the qualitative context. Here, the researcher lays out his or her procedure and research instruments in such a way that others can attempt to collect data in similar conditions. The idea here is that if these similar conditions are applied, a similar explanation for the phenomenon should be found.

In sum, trustworthiness provides qualitative researchers with a set of tools by which they can illustrate the worth of their project outside the confines of the often ill-fitting quantitative parameters.

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See also

Further Readings

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

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