# Chapter 11

# Validity and qualitative psychology

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There is now considerable discussion among qualitative psychologists about how to assess the quality of qualitative research. The background to this was growing disaffection with the judging of qualitative research within the traditional framework of validity and reliability applied to quantitative research. This was particularly the case with journals, for example, which might reject a qualitative paper because it did not meet the assumed requirements of validity for quantitative work. The view of many qualitative researchers is that validity and quality are important considerations, but that qualitative research must be judged by criteria which are appropriate to it.

While there has been thinking and writing about this for some time (for example, Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992; Smith, 1996b; Stiles, 1993), the discussion has reached a new maturity with the publication of two papers which present general guidelines for assessing the quality of qualitative psychological research (Elliott et al., 1999; Yardley, 2000). I think of these publications as mature for two main reasons. First, their suggested criteria are wide-ranging and offer a range of ways of establishing quality. Second, they attempt to offer criteria which can be applied irrespective of the particular theoretical orientation of a qualitative study. That first factor is important because some qualitative psychologists feared this debate might lead to a simplistic prescriptive checklist of items, whereby a journal editor could read a qualitative paper and award it a score of, say, 7 out of 10 on quality and use that to decide whether it was publishable or not. The papers by Yardley and Elliott et al. avoid that pitfall.

Lucy Yardley offers three broad principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research. The first principle is *sensitivity to context*. She argues that a good qualitative research study should demonstrate a sensitivity to the context in which the study is situated. However, she offers a number of different ways in which such sensitivity can be established. Researchers can show an awareness of the existing literature, and this, in turn, can be either substantive or theoretical, the former related to the topic of investigation, and the latter to the underpinnings of the research method itself. For example, a phenomenological study of perceptions of kindness might use much of the introduction to outline the rationale for a phenomenological study and show an awareness of the key concepts of the approach. The discussion could link the study's findings to the extant psychological literature on the substantive area.

Alternatively, one might consider the degree to which the study is sensitive to the data itself, for example, in terms of how well the unfolding argument is evidenced with material drawn from participants. So, for example, a discourse analytic study on how participants account for political allegiance would usually have detailed extracts from the participants' responses to provide evidence for the interpretation being offered. Yet another way the researchers can demonstrate sensitivity to context is by attending to how the socio-cultural milieu in which the study takes place may have influenced its conduct and outcome. Thus, for example, a narrative study on orchestral musicians' biographies might attend to how normative expectations in this historical period and the socio-cultural situation of the particular group from which participants have been drawn may influence the results. Finally, the relationship between researcher and participant itself is a further context one might be sensitive to. Thus, an author might note how the expectations of participants affected their response in an interview and draw on examples of the interview process to illustrate that.

Yardley's second broad principle is *commitment, rigour, transparency and coherence*. Commitment can be tested by the degree of engagement demonstrated, but this can itself be in a number of domains, such as through extended experience using the particular qualitative approach or from extensive knowledge of the substantive field. So, for example, as part of the write-up of a study on attitudes of professionals and viewers towards 'reality television', a grounded theorist might attest to her or his 'commitment' from having conducted several grounded theory studies over the course of ten years. At a more particular level, the grounded theorist might demonstrate it through intensive and prolonged 'fieldwork' during this specific study and by indications of extended immersion in the data collected.

Rigour refers to the thoroughness of the study, in terms of the appropriateness of the sample to the question in hand and the completeness of the analysis undertaken. Transparency and coherence refer to how clearly the stages of the research process are outlined in the write-up of the study. A researcher using interpretative phenomenological analysis to study how participants make sense of government foreign policy may attempt to enhance transparency by carefully describing how participants were selected, how the interview schedule was constructed and the interview conducted, and what steps were used in analysis. The coherence of the analytic argument and claims being made can be evaluated by the reader as well. Yardley suggests that coherence can also refer to the fit between the research carried out and the underlying philosophical assumptions of the approach

being followed. So, reading the report of a cooperative inquiry on the influence of new technology on work practices, one would wish to check for indicators that the co-researchers understood and adhered to the principles underlying the approach.

Yardley's third broad principle is *impact and importance*. She argues that however well a piece of research is conducted, a key test of its validity is whether it actually tells us anything useful or important or makes any difference. Thus, the reader can ask questions of a study in terms of the light it sheds on the existing work that has been done in the area. Does that conversation analytic study of interruptions illuminate what was already written about the phenomenon? Equally valuable or valid, however, is the possible contribution the study can make in terms of social change or practice. Does that focus-group study of user involvement in the National Health Service suggest how such involvement could be extended?

To reiterate: I think Yardley's paper makes a particularly useful contribution because it outlines some broad principles by which the quality of qualitative psychology can be assessed, but it does not prescribe the particular ways in which these must be met. Rather, a number of ways that each principle can be established are outlined, and Yardley emphasizes that different studies can address these in different ways. Elliott et al.'s paper is equally pluralistic and pragmatic. It is also the case that while these two papers appear in specialist psychology journals in health and clinical psychology, the principles and practices outlined have much more general applicability and can be considered useful for evaluating qualitative research studies in any area of psychology.

I will finish with a discussion of the independent audit, which is not covered in detail in the two papers mentioned. I want to consider it here as I think the independent audit is an extremely useful way of thinking about quality in qualitative research.

Yin (1989) suggests that one way of checking the validity of one's research report is to file all the data in such a way that somebody could follow the chain of evidence that has led to the final report. Thus, if one thinks of an interview project, the chain might comprise initial notes on research question, interview schedule, audiotapes, annotated transcripts, codings and initial categorizations, draft reports and final report.

At a first level, it can be argued that this is good discipline for the researcher. By putting oneself in the place of someone having to make sense of the final report and check that a coherent chain of arguments runs from initial raw data to a final write-up, one is forced to check the rigour of one's claims. At this level, the audit is hypothetical or virtual. The researcher files the data in such a way that someone else *could* check through the 'paper trail'.

Of course, one can go further and actually conduct an independent audit. In this case, the file of material, sequenced as above, is given to a

researcher who played no part in the project. This researcher's task is to check that the final report is a credible one in terms of the data that have been collected and that a logical progression exists through the chain of evidence.

It is important to distinguish between an independent audit and inter-rater reliability. The independent auditor is attempting to ensure that the account produced is credible and justified in terms of the data collected, but not necessarily the only or definitive account which could be produced. This speaks to the particular nature of qualitative inquiry. The aim of an independent audit is not to produce a single report which claims to represent 'the truth', nor, necessarily, to reach a consensus. The independent audit allows for the possibility of a number of legitimate accounts; therefore, the concern is with how systematically and transparently this particular account has been produced.

The independent audit can be conducted at a number of levels. Indeed, it is possible at the maximal level to pass all one's box files at the end of a study to a researcher who was not involved in the project and ask that researcher to conduct an 'independent audit'. At the other end of the spectrum, supervisors can conduct mini-audits of their students' work by, for example, looking at the first interview transcript annotated with the student's initial codes, categories or themes. The supervisor can check that the annotations have some validity in relation to the text being examined and the approach being employed. During this early apprenticeship phase, it is also appropriate for supervisors to offer occasional additional notes on what they think is interesting or important in the transcript. This is with a view to helping novices see good practice in action and so help them develop their own skills.

## Conclusion

Qualitative methods are at last finding their place in psychological research. This offers an exciting prospect, as more and more qualitative research studies make their mark in the discipline. The aim of this book has been to outline the main qualitative approaches now being employed in psychology. Hopefully, it will encourage and inspire readers to conduct qualitative research studies, thus making their own contribution to that growth of qualitative psychology.