Establishing quality in qualitative research: trustworthiness, validity, and a lack of consensus

Chapter · November 2022

DOI: 10.1016/b978-0-12-818630-5.11032-2

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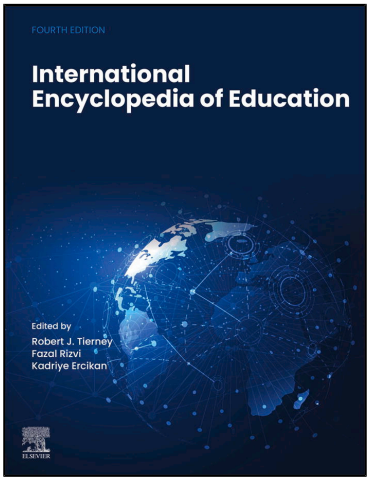

From Cain, L.K., Williams, R.E., Bradshaw, V., 2023. In: Tierney, R.J., Rizvi, F., Erkican, K. (Eds.), International Encyclopedia of Education, vol. 12. Elsevier.
https://dx.doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-818630-5.11032-2.
ISBN: 9780128186305

Establishing quality in qualitative research: trustworthiness, validity, and a lack of consensus

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Introduction—quality is complicated

Qualitative scholars have long debated notions of quality within qualitative research, rarely arriving at a conclusive consensus. In fact, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005) reviewed literature and found that there were over 50 terms (such as authenticity, trustworthiness, and transparency, among others) used across qualitative publications at that time. We estimate that this list has grown, and were they to repeat their study, they would likely find even more. While this lack of consensus makes writing a chapter such as this daunting, it is imperative that we engage in these conversations in order to continually improve the craft of inquiry as well as our understanding of how scholars enact various forms of quality within qualitative research.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) summarized the uncertainty around describing *quality* within qualitative research that often leaves both new and established researchers feeling mentally debilitated, saying,

International Encyclopedia of Education, Fourth Edition, 2023, 336–350

> I feel paralyzed, unsure of where to begin, or what to write. As I search the literature, I find that evaluation is necessary but there is little consensus about what that evaluation should consist of. Are we judging for 'validity' or would it be better to use terms like 'rigor' … 'trustworthiness' … or 'goodness' … or something called 'integrity' … when referring to qualitative evaluation? (p. 297).

This lack of consensus can be traced back to earlier qualitative work as well. For example, many of our foundational scholars argued that the concept of *validity*, stemming from epistemological frameworks primarily found in quantitative traditions, is incompatible with values held by qualitative researchers (Kvale, 1995; Lather, 1993; Ravitch and Carl, 2019; Wolcott, 1990). Lather (1993), however, chose to specifically embrace the term *validity* in order to "both circulate and break with the signs that code it … all of the baggage that it carries plus, in a doubled-movement, what it means to rupture validity as a regime of truth, to displace its historical inscription" (p. 674). Lather's reclamation of the term validity marked a turning point in how many qualitative scholars conceptualize quality within their research.

Other scholars argue that there are three key concerns that prevent us from being able to present a unified framework for quality in qualitative research: (1) there is little consensus about what quality research looks like, (2) traditional positivist evaluation criteria, such as notions of validity and reliability within quantitative methods, continue to impact the way that we discuss quality in other methodological approaches, and (3) there are very specific culturally- and politically-defined notions about what constitutes as evidence (Cho and Trent, 2020; Trainor and Graue, 2013). These three complications can help us begin to explain why conversations around quality in qualitative research are complicated.

The factors that constitute good qualitative research are interpretable, mutable, and up for negotiation. These quality indicators should be engaged and critically examined; we encourage qualitative researchers to work within this more flexible framework of quality instead of seeking to uphold foundational traditions stemming from other methodological paradigms. Critically engaging with quality determinants turns our focus away from defining good research as the precise application of methods, as more traditionally used in quantitative methods, and instead toward process and outcomes from our work. However, our focus on process and outcomes does not mean that there are no criteria for determining the quality of qualitative methods—there certainly are!

The indicators of quality criteria that you ultimately choose will depend on your theoretical, ontological, epistemological, and methodological decisions and commitments. Ontological and epistemological commitments are particularly important to consider within qualitative research, as researchers will often choose to pursue quality indicators that fit within their beliefs. In other words, what you consider to be good, rigorous, and valid research stems from your assumptions about how knowledge is produced. For more information about how ontological, epistemological, and methodological considerations fit together and for an exploration of some frequently used paradigms, please see other chapters within this encyclopedia provided by Eileen Boswell and Wayne Babchuk ("Philosophical and Theoretical Underpinnings of Qualitative Research") and Peggy Shannon-Baker ("Philosophical Underpinnings of Mixed Methods Research in Education").

Within the following sections, we introduce the concept of what we call The Salad Bar Approach, detail 23 quality determinants that are often used across qualitative scholarship, and finally, summarize the chapter with an included demonstration of how some of the quality determinants can be used.

The salad bar approach to considering quality in qualitative research

You have a variety of choices when it comes to choosing which quality determinants to use within your qualitative project. In fact, there are arguments being made for new determinants all the time! It would be impossible to list and define every single existing quality construct due to practical concerns, such as page limitations, and timeliness concerns, as there are consistently new arguments taking place about what does/does not and should/should not exist in regard to measuring quality. Instead, we wish to share a metaphor that one of our authors, Leia, provides to students within her qualitative methodology courses: the salad bar approach.

Imagine that you are building a salad and that all of the available ingredients, toppings, and salad dressings are spread upon a table before you. You build your salad based on how you, personally, enjoy it; perhaps you include a fair amount of lettuce, a large number of other vegetables, such as zucchini, cucumbers, and carrots, a light sprinkling of cheese, and finally, a touch of ranch dressing. Another person walks up to the table where these ingredients are presented and builds their salad: a few handfuls of arugula, many onions, sunflower seeds, tomatoes, and a massive heaping of raspberry vinaigrette. While your salads differ in how you built them, they are both quality salads. If asked to describe how each ingredient decision was made, you would both be able to justify what you believe to contribute to a good salad.

Qualitative research is very much the same as these salads. Each qualitative researcher may work through the inquiry process in different ways, utilize diverse theoretical frameworks and paradigmatic beliefs, engage in various forms of data collection and analysis, and apply different forms of quality evidence. The most important thing to consider when judging each of these qualitative salads is to justify your composition. While it is often known that authors must provide a justification for readers as to how each action was taken throughout the research process fits their research question, it is less common knowledge that you are

also able to choose and should therefore justify which quality determinants best fit your theoretical, ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments.

There are few limits across diverse representations of qualitative research—and this discussion of quality is no different. There are many types of quality determinants that you may choose to use in your qualitative work—you must simply ensure that you have justified your decisions and that they fit with the other elements of your study.

Determinants of quality in qualitative research

In this section, we present 23 determinants of quality in qualitative research. We define each construct and provide reflective questions for researchers seeking to utilize each particular determinant. We have also created **Table 1**, which lists the quality determinants, key citations for each, similarly used terms, and paradigms with which each determinant is commonly paired. Again, we wish to reiterate that there is little consensus within the broad field of qualitative methodologies. We cannot impress upon you enough the vast importance of knowing what is valued within your field, as some of these constructs are more common and accepted than others within individual fields. Our entries, below, have been alphabetized for ease of locating specific determinants.

Authenticity

Scholars who seek authenticity are concerned with both engaging in a worthy topic and understanding the larger implications of their research (i.e. how the project potentially benefits society). Guba and Lincoln (1989) described five dimensions of authenticity: (1) fairness related to the research participants and stakeholders, (2) ontological authenticity, which refers to the alignment between the researcher's paradigmatic approach, (3) educative authenticity, meant to increase the audience's awareness of the issue, (4) catalytic authenticity, which refers to the study's potential for action, and (5) tactical authenticity, referring to change or empowerment as a result of the research project.

When considering fairness, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Am I doing what is in the best interest of my research project, my research participants, and the stakeholders?

When considering ontological authenticity, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Am I being authentic to my paradigmatic views?
- Am I appropriately employing my paradigms?

When considering educative authenticity, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Am I educating my readers clearly and accurately?

When considering catalytic and tactic authenticity, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- What can my work catalyze people to do?

Centering ethical considerations

Qualitative scholars have long argued for emphasizing ethical considerations within your writing. You should consider the procedures you're using, participant well-being or burden, demonstrate cultural competency, respect relationships, and maintain other ethical boundaries set in place by the nature of the research study. Miles et al. (2019) posited that centering ethics allows research to come out of a place of respect, dignity, and honor to the research process and its participants. It is each researcher's responsibility to uphold ethical guidelines set by institutional review boards and other research governing bodies, yet the concept of centering ethical considerations calls for engagement in ethical thinking outside of the bounds set by those gatekeepers. Additionally, it is the researcher's responsibility to anticipate any ethically challenging situations that could arise throughout the research process and have contingency plans in place. One must remember to maintain ethics throughout project conception, data collection, analysis, and reporting results. These considerations should then be detailed within publications so that readers can understand the ethical thinking that the author(s) engaged in. When ethical considerations are clearly delineated within your work, you are able to bring attention to ethical decision-making throughout the study. It is your responsibility to report adverse events and consider these events in reviewing the conclusion of the study.

When considering centering ethical considerations, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- What ethical concerns may arise during my study in regard to interacting with participants?
- What are the best ways for me to handle sensitive information shared with me by the participants?
- What steps should I take when working with protected or vulnerable populations (e.g., children, employees, incarcerated individuals)?
- How can I ensure that all members of my research team are on the same page regarding ethical decision-making?

Table 1 Table of quality determinants.

Quality determinant (key citations)	*Brief description*	*Similar terms*	*Common paradigms*
3.1 Authenticity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985)	Researchers must engage in a worthy topic and understanding the larger implications of their research.	N/A	Constructivism Interpretivism
3.2 Centering ethical considerations (Miles et al., 2019; Tracy, 2010)	Researchers must emphasize ethical decision-making within their work.	N/A	Critical paradigms Interpretivism Postpositivism
3.3 Consistency (Drisko, 1997; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Reid, 1994)	Researchers must understand the literature that contextualizes their study and provide explicit connections between the literature and their findings.	• Confirmability (Johnson et al., 2020) • Dependability (Nassaji, 2020) • Reliability (Yilmaz, 2013)	Postpositivism
3.4 Credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Patton, 1999; Tracy, 2010)	Researchers must provide enough evidence to demonstrate that their interpretations of the data are meaningful.	• Internal validity (Meijer et al., 2002) • Trustworthiness (Little and Green, 2022)	Interpretivism Postpositivism
3.5 Critical subjectivity (Lincoln, 1995)	Researchers must deconstruct their beliefs, biases, subjectivities, experiences, identities, and more, to understand how their core beliefs affect their decisions throughout the study.	• Transformative subjectivity (Frieden, 1989)	Constructivism Critical paradigms Interpretivism
3.6 Meaningful coherence (Lather, 1993; Tracy, 2010)	Researchers must ensure that their research reports demonstrate significant alignment through their introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and discussion sections.	N/A	Interpretivism Postpositivism
3.7 Member checking (Lather, 1986; Lincoln and Guba, 1985)	Researchers must share their findings with participants in order to confirm the accuracy of their interpretation.	• Member reflections (Tracy, 2010)	Constructivism Critical paradigms Interpretivism Postpositivism
3.8 Memoing (Glaser, 1978)	Researchers must keep a record of their thoughts, feelings, emotional responses, and questions that arise throughout the inquiry process.	N/A	Interpretivism Postpositivism
3.9 Positionality (Lincoln, 1995)	Researchers must reflect on their identities in relation to their study's participants and data.	• Standpoint judgment (Nakata, 2015)	Constructivism Critical paradigms Interpretivism
3.10 Reciprocity (Lincoln, 1995; McLaughlin and Tierney, 1993)	Researchers must consider the bonds that exist between researcher and participant and work to create a relationship marked by trust, care, and mutual benefit.	N/A	Constructivist Critical paradigms Interpretivist
3.11 Reflexivity (Peshkin, 1988)	Researchers must reflect upon their paradigmatic commitments, their relationship to the study participants, and their beliefs about the research topic.	• Critical reflexivity (Glass, 2015) • Transformative reflexivity (Relano Pastor, 2011)	Constructivism Critical paradigms Interpretivism Postmodernism
3.12 Relational ethics (Adams et al., 2015)	Researchers must recognize and protect the connection between themselves, their participants, and the communities in which they live and work.	N/A	Constructivism Critical paradigms
3.13 Resonance (Schutz, 1967; Tracy, 2010)	Researchers must influence readers through evocative representations of their data.	N/A	Constructivism Interpretivism
3.14 Rich rigor (Golafshani, 2003; Tracy, 2010)	Researchers must provide a detailed, clear research design and methodology.	N/A	Interpretivism Postpositivism
3.15 Sacredness (Lincoln, 1995; Schaef, 1981)	Researchers must have a profound respect for human dignity and justice, and seek to turn their findings into action.	N/A	Constructivism Critical paradigms Feminism Interpretivism

(Continued)

Table 1 Table of quality determinants.—cont'd

Quality determinant (key citations)	*Brief description*	*Similar terms*	*Common paradigms*
3.16 Sharing privilege (Lather, 1993; Lincoln, 1995)	Researchers must examine how they can share with participants and communities the earned dignity, respect, prestige, and economic benefits from publishing their work.	N/A	Constructivism Critical paradigms Feminism Interpretivism
3.17 Significant contributions (Schwandt, 1996; Tracy, 1995)	Researchers must use their research to address theoretical, methodological, cultural, moral, and practical gaps within the literature.	N/A	Critical paradigms Postpositivism
3.18 Sincerity (Emerson et al., 1995; Seale, 1999)	Researchers must be transparent about the decisions made throughout their research.	N/A	Constructivism Interpretivism
3.19 Sites as arbiters of quality (Lincoln, 1995; Savage, 1988)	Researchers must pursue a situated and complex knowledge that embraces ways of knowing beyond their own in order to assist marginalized populations.	• Communitarian (Denzin, 2006) • Community as arbiter of quality (Boughton, 1997)	Constructivism Critical paradigms Interpretivism
3.20 Transgressive validities [ironic, rhizomatic, paralogical, and voluptuous validity] (Lather, 1993)	Researchers must reject traditional positivist conceptualizations of validity in order to proliferate form (ironic validity), understand how their participants exist within systemic networks (rhizomatic validity), foster differences and embrace contradictions (paralogical validity), and obtaining an abundance of data (voluptuous validity).	N/A	Feminism Postmodernism Poststructuralism
3.21 Triangulation (Denzin, 1978)	Researchers must utilize multiple data sources to obtain answers to their research question(s).	N/A	Constructivism Interpretivism Postpositivism
3.22 Voice (LeCompte, 1993; Lincoln, 1995)	Researchers must consider whose voice(s) are undervalued, and seek out those who are silenced within data collection.	• Polyvocality (Clifford, 1986)	Constructivist Critical theorist Interpretivist
3.23 Worthy topic (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Tracy, 2010)	Researchers must choose topics that are significant to current literature, society, and personal events.	N/A	Postpositivist

Consistency

Scholars who choose to pursue consistency argue the importance of understanding the literature contextualizing your topic and sharing with readers a fluid story about those connections through the presentation of your findings. These scholars seek to make connections throughout the study's report, always linking back to the research purpose, as the purpose should drive all decisions that they make throughout the inquiry process (Noble and Smith, 2015; Lincoln and Guba, 1985), and ensure that they provide a rationale for these decisions that aligns with their research purpose. Further, Drisko (1997) suggested feedback sessions with the participants to confirm your interpretation of their data and the conclusions that you have drawn; this process is often referred to as member checking (described later in this list). It is critical to avoid being vague, leaving readers with too much of an opportunity to draw conclusions of their own. As the researcher, you are privy to the originally collected data and have the best sense (second to your participants!) of what to include in order to descriptively share findings with readers.

When considering consistency, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Are my research questions strong?
- Does each section within my writeup refer back to the purpose of my study?
- Do I make explicit connections between my research questions, the literature, my methodological decisions, and my findings?
- Does this clearly connect to the purpose of the study?
  - If your answer is "no," or unclear, you should approach your project in another way in order to maintain consistent alignment throughout the report.
  - If the answer is "yes," have a colleague read over your work to check for the consistency you aimed to maintain throughout the paper.

Credibility

Readers of qualitative research should trust your findings are credible. Credibility refers to your ability to use your data as proof of findings (Patton, 1999). When a researcher is credible, they present enough evidence regarding the data they have collected, analyzed, and shared to draw their conclusion. Researchers must carefully extrapolate pieces of data that best represent their conclusions while maintaining the nature of the participants' words. It is critical that the researcher draws conclusions from the data and *shows* rather than *tells* the readers how those conclusions were made, and that those conclusions are believable to the reader based on the evidence presented (Tracy, 1995).

To increase the credibility of your conclusions, participate in data-checking techniques such as triangulation, member checking, polyvocality, and reflexivity (see Tracy, 1995), which are detailed in this chapter. A common theme among these techniques is including your participants in the process of drawing conclusions based on the data. Once you have made conclusions about your findings, take time to ensure that (1) the information you shared was representative of participant experiences, (2) you included multiple voices throughout your findings (when appropriate), and (3) you have addressed various levels of relationship power dynamics. Further, you should indicate which credibility techniques you used to help your readers understand the quality of your findings.

When considering credibility, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Have I participated in one or more data-checking techniques?
- Have I described these techniques in my written report?

Critical subjectivity

Critical subjectivity involves the process of reflexively deconstructing our own beliefs, biases, subjectivities, experiences, identities, and more, in order to understand our core beliefs and then share those beliefs with our readers. Lincoln (1995) argued that "such reflexivity or subjectivity enables the researcher to begin to uncover dialectic relationships, array and discuss contradictions within the stories being recorded, and move with research participants toward action" (p. 283). It is important to understand not only the beliefs, experiences, and perspectives that each of us brings to our research but also how those beliefs affect our actions throughout the inquiry process.

In order to participate in critical subjectivity, you must first critically examine the lenses that you bring to a study. As mentioned above, these should include your own beliefs, biases, subjectivities, experiences, identities, and anything else relevant to the topic that you are studying. You should engage with this practice throughout the inquiry process, and include these considerations within your final written research report so that readers can understand your process and understand how you approached the study.

When considering critical subjectivity, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- How do your beliefs about the creation of knowledge impact the way that you design your study?
- Which forms of evidence do you feel are worthy?
- How may your shared and unshared identities affect the way that you interact with participants?
- How may your beliefs affect the way that you analyze the data, and even which findings seem to jump off of the page to you?
- How might your lived experience shroud other findings from your immediate view?

Meaningful coherence

Scholars who wish to claim meaningful coherence should ensure that their research reports demonstrate significant alignment throughout the introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and discussion sections (Tracy, 2010). More specifically, authors should confirm that (1) there is a clear purpose statement at the onset of the research paper and that the research study achieves that stated purpose, (2) the literature review provides context and informs the research questions, (3) the methods address the stated research question(s) and are grounded in appropriate theoretical and paradigmatic approaches, and (4) the discussion section speaks to and addresses concerns brought to light in the literature review. Ultimately, a research study that is meaningfully coherent achieves the stated purpose and leaves readers feeling fulfilled in the pursuit of that purpose.

When considering meaningful coherence, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Have I ensured that I tell a single, cogent story of my study from beginning to end?
- Have I considered how other scholars from the existing literature may impact how I frame my study?
- Have I chosen a methodology that is best suited to answer my research questions?
- Are my research questions grounded in my theoretical and paradigmatic commitments?

Member checking

Researchers who choose to utilize member checking most often tend to share their findings with participants in order to determine "whether the participants recognize them as true or accurate" (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p. 242). This can be an incredibly useful

process, as participating in member checking can serve not only as validation of your interpretations, but also as new data or points of view by which to view your study (Tracy, 2010). This process also allows us to share power with the participants by allowing them to control how their stories are presented. We often participate in member checking by sending participants two files; (1) one with the full written findings section, so that they may see their data within the overall context of the study, and (2) another with just their portions pulled out in case that is easier for the participant to interact with.

When considering member checking, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Have I sought feedback from my participants about how I presented their data?
- Did I adjust or revise any portions of my findings that participants did not agree with?
- If there are revisions that I have chosen not to make, have I acknowledged these tensions within my written report?

Memoing

Many qualitative researchers utilize memoing throughout their study design, data collection, and analysis to keep a record of their thoughts, feelings, emotional responses, and questions that arise throughout the inquiry process (Birks et al., 2008). Researchers use memoing as a way to save relevant information about the data that may not be apparent or can be easily forgotten at a later time (Glaser, 1978). Further, by keeping records of decisions and meanings constructed from the data, the researcher can enhance their credibility.

You can keep a notepad of your continued thoughts and questions through each step of the research process. In fact, you can utilize memoing as a side conversation that you have with yourself or among your research team as you analyze your data. While you rarely include your notes within your final research publication, memoing can provide support and enhance your understanding of the research processes, allowing you to understand the data beyond the surface level.

When considering memoing, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- How does the data make you feel?
- What questions do you still have for your participants or research team?
- Does your data stir any of your emotions or memories of personal experiences?

Positionality

Qualitative researchers often elaborate on positionality within their published work by reflecting upon their identities in relation to their study's participants and data. These scholars often do so because of the epistemological belief that we will never truly, completely, and fully understand truth outside of the context from which it was created. For example, Lincoln (1995) argued that "we can deduce that texts that claim whole and complete truth or that claim to present universal, grant metanarrative, or generalizable knowledge … are themselves spacious, inauthentic, and misleading" (p. 280). Understanding how a researcher positions themselves within their work is imperative to grasp the meaning and quality of their work. Scholars who support positionality as an indicator of quality argue that appearing detached and claiming objectivity in your work detracts from its quality, and in fact places barriers on how much quality you can truly claim.

In order to utilize positionality within your own work, you must "come clean" (Lincoln, 1995, p. 280) about your own beliefs, identities, and paradigmatic commitments. In order for readers to understand how you have interpreted the data, they must first understand the beliefs that you have about the nature of truth and knowledge. You must also be willing to share your subjective, social, and cultural positions within the larger context of your work.

When considering positionality, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- What identities do I have in relation to this study?
- How do those identities and beliefs affect the way that I approach and interact with my participants, design, analysis, and which findings I have chosen to report?
- Have I extended my engagement with my own identities beyond simply listing them and critically examined how they affect each aspect of the inquiry process?

Reciprocity

Scholars who embrace the idea of reciprocity argue that we must consider the bonds created between researcher and participant (Lincoln, 1995; McLaughlin and Tierney, 1993). That is to say that each individual participating in the research (which includes us as researchers!) must establish a relationship with each other "marked by a deep sense of trust, caring, and mutuality" (Lincoln, 1995, p. 284). This process can be considered one of purposeful, intense, deep sharing that "opens all lives party to the inquiry to examination" (Lincoln, 1995, pp. 283–284). Those who advocate for reciprocity as an indicator of quality ask how we can share ourselves in relation to the ways that our participants have shared themselves with us.

Indeed, the idea of reciprocity infers that we must be open with ourselves, and our experiences, as researchers both within our interactions with participants as well as throughout our published reports. We often task our participants with sharing their deepest

thoughts, beliefs, and experiences—we are seeking their vulnerability–however, we do not often share ourselves in those spaces as well. As authors of this chapter, we often feel that this ideology aligns closely with Roulston's (2010) conceptualization of romantic interviewing; we share of ourselves to build trust with the participant.

When considering reciprocity, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- What parts of myself am I comfortable sharing with my participants?
- How can I make the interview space feel more like a conversation in which we both share about ourselves?

Reflexivity

Scholars who engage in reflexivity reflect on their own subjectivities and positionalities, deconstructing how those beliefs and identities shape and are shaped by each aspect of the research process. Reflexivity is the process of turning inward in an effort to recognize and take responsibility for the various ways in which one is situated within the research. Researchers should reflect upon their paradigmatic commitments, their relationship to the study participants, and their beliefs about the research topic.

Some questions to begin reflecting on include: What is your philosophy as a researcher? What is your relationship to the research topic? Answering these questions at the onset of the study allows you to understand how you think about and handle your own influence on the study and to recognize how your own subjectivities and positionalities may impact the creation of research questions. During the data collection process, engaging in reflexivity may include self-reflection in which you seek to understand your emotions and reactions during your interview. By engaging in this self-reflection, you may become attuned to the fact that you have emphasized certain things while shying away from others. During the final write-up, reflexivity may take the form of conscious editing, wherein you fully engage with the data and remain aware of the ways in which your sensitivities can drive what you deem as important. Some useful tools to practice reflexivity include, but are not limited to journaling, self-interviewing, talking with colleagues/peers/friends, researcher memos, video diaries, and poetry/art/music.

When considering reflexivity, it may be helpful to ask yourself the following questions based upon which step of the research process you are currently reflecting:

- Step 1: Finding your research question.
  - Why is this study important to you? Or why did you choose to pursue this study?
  - What do you already know about your topic?
  - What have you experienced?
  - What do you believe about it?
- Step 2: Reviewing the literature.
  - How do previous studies affect the way that you think about your research?
  - How do these other studies relate to your own study?
- Step 3: Figuring out your methods.
  - What do you believe about the nature of truth and reality?
  - What values do you hold related to the inquiry process?
  - How do these beliefs and values align with various research paradigms?
  - How do you feel about your methodological choices?
- Step 4: Collecting data.
  - What personal identities do you have that are related to this study?
  - Which identities do you share with your participants?
  - Which identities do you NOT share with your participants?
  - How do these common and different identities affect the way in which participants will interact with you? Or what kind of data they will choose to share or not share?
- Step 5: Analyzing data.
  - Will your identities lead you to look for specific things?
  - Which findings stand out to you more due to your own experiences?
- Step 6: Writing your findings.
  - How do you choose which of your findings to privilege over others?
  - How will you order your findings?
  - How will you practice transparency concerning your ethical concerns and reflexivity?

Relational ethics

A scholar who utilizes relational ethics "recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work" (Adams et al., 2015). Qualitative researchers often form interpersonal bonds with their participants, whether purposefully or organically. When engaging in relational ethics, the researcher takes into consideration those interpersonal bonds and makes decisions in ways that seek to protect them. A researcher focused on relational ethics is often more concerned with creating mutual respect and engaging with their participants than they are

about taking advantage of their participants in an effort to churn out good research. In fact, they often have a sense of reciprocity in which the ultimate goal is to care for, respect, and do justice to and for their participants.

Your consideration of relational ethics may take a variety of forms depending on the type of research that you are engaging in and the ultimate goal of that research. However, all researchers incorporating relational ethics have one shared goal: that decisions be made within the context of the relationships being formed.

When considering relational ethics, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Have I considered the relationships I formed with participants while engaging in ethical reasoning?
- Have I ensured that I will not harm the growing mutual respect and care that I have built with my participants?
- Have I invited participants to collaborate during data analysis or within the writing of my findings?

Resonance

Researchers who seek to ensure that their study contains resonance seek to influence readers through evocative representations of the data. The researchers will use their participants' words to create a clear understanding of findings that are relevant and transferable to other areas of study and life (Tracy, 2010). Scholars who are particularly adept at utilizing resonance can often present their findings in such a way as to relate to readers from varied backgrounds.

If you choose to seek resonance within your work, make sure that you write in a way that is clear and concise so that a reader who is not an expert within your field can understand and connect to your study. Rather than leaving a reader to decide how your findings are meaningful, paint a vivid picture using explicit examples pulled from the data to represent your claims.

When considering resonance, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Have a *shown* instead of *told* the readers what my findings are by including many direct quotes from participants?
- Have I chosen quotes that are particularly emotional or powerful?
- Have I written my report in such a way that others outside of my field can understand my work?

Rich rigor

A scholar who seeks to claim that they are using rich rigor within their research ensures that they have provided a detailed, clear research design and methodology. From the beginning of the research design, the researcher identifies the purpose of the study and notes every decision made in alignment with the purpose of the study. The author's published methodological process is detailed, and the researcher has collected enough data to convincingly make conclusions (Golafshani, 2003). This is often achieved through data saturation, which refers to the process of collecting data until you no longer encounter new perspectives among your participants.

When considering rich rigor, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Did I clearly describe each step that I took in designing my study? In collecting data? In analyzing data?
- Have I presented enough data in my writing to convince readers that the conclusions I have drawn are meaningful and appropriate?
- How can I include other data sources to support my analyses?
- How have my methodological decisions contributed to my ability to create a data set that adequately represents the participants?

Sacredness

Feminist researchers have long argued for the concept of sacredness to be at the center of high-quality research (Lincoln, 1995; Schaef, 1981). Lincoln (1995) described this concept as concerning researchers with "a profound concern for human dignity, justice, and interpersonal respect … the collaborative and egalitarian aspects of the relationships created in the research-to-action continuum" (p. 284). Scholars who choose to embrace sacredness often seek to create relationships with participants based on mutual respect between researcher and participant and deep respect for each participant's personal dignity. Lincoln (1995) further argued that sacredness should be used to further explore the connection between the people with whom we are conducting research (fellow researchers, participants, gatekeepers, etc.) and ecological concerns. She additionally argued that if we do not hold sacred our very Earth and how our work affects it, we destroy not only our physical environment but also the human spirit by which we study.

In embracing the concept of sacredness we must choose to design a study that allows us to interact with participants in a way that respects them as unique individuals. For example, we often see this enacted as consistently checking in with participants to ensure that they are comfortable continuing to share their perspectives through multiple interviews, focus groups, observations, or phases within a study, comfortable with how we are portraying them in our final published reports (this can be achieved through member checking), and allowing them to dictate how data collection interactions occur. For example, you may choose unstructured or semi-structured interviews in order to allow your participants to take you on a journey of their choosing instead of sticking to a strict list of questions.

When considering sacredness, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- What can I do within the interview/focus group/observation to make participants comfortable?
- Have I checked in with each participant to make sure that they are comfortable scheduling a follow-up interview?
- Did I give participants a choice as to where they would like to meet for an interview?
- Have I allowed participants to help shape our conversation within the interview space?

Sharing privilege

In seeking to share privilege we must grapple with the question of *who owns the data?* Do we, as the authors, own the stories that are shared with us that we then published? Or are data always owned by the participants who have shared it with us? Or, better yet, are data owned by the university that houses us as we publish in seeking tenure? Lincoln (1995) argued that "the somewhat dark side of research hides the fact that most of our research is written for ourselves and our own consumption, and it earns us the dignity, respect, prestige, and economic power in our own worlds that those about whom we write frequently don't have" (p. 285). Sharing privilege is all about interrogating the ways in which we, as researchers, benefit from the lived experiences and stories shared with us by our participants, and then enacting action in a way that shares that privilege or gives back to those who have loaned us their stories.

There are many practical ways in which sharing privilege has been enacted within research studies. For example, Lincoln (1995) shared stories of an author who shared royalties from her book with her participant, even going as far as to contribute to her participant's mortgage payment when in need, and Lather (2001), who sought to publish alongside her participants in order to ensure that they are given as much recognition for the work as she was. Sharing privilege can look like sharing financial gain you may experience with participants, sharing authorship, allowing participants to share in the decision-making process about what is and is not published, where it is published, and so on. One of our authors, Leia, shared privilege by asking the participant in a single-person case study where they would prefer that Leia donate money that she was awarded after the publication of the article. Originally, Leia had offered to send the award money to the participant, who instead indicated that they did not wish to receive it.

When considering sharing privilege, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- How would I feel about inviting participants to write with me in exchange for including their name on my final publication?
- How can I share my data, findings, or compensation with organizations or non-profits that tackle issues related to my research?

Significant contributions

Though we do not determine statistical significance in qualitative analysis, we can determine the significant contribution qualitative research has on expanding the literature on a given topic. To be considered a significant contribution, the research question must first address a gap in the literature, whether that be theoretical, regarding professional practices, or overall cultural or moral views (Tracy, 2010). Our contributions as qualitative researchers can be significant when we address gaps within our existing knowledge and utilize our data to narrow those gaps. Though it is impossible to conduct a perfect study, as long as the research question, methods, and data-driven findings relate to the gap in our existing knowledge, a scholar can argue that they have made a significant contribution to the literature.

When considering significant contributions, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Have I thoroughly explored the literature about my topic in order to discover any existing gaps?
- Have I designed my study in such a way as to close or narrow those gaps?
- Are my chosen methods the best choices for exploring these concepts?
- Have I explicitly connected my findings and how they fit within the larger context of existing literature?

Sincerity

Similar to authenticity, a researcher's sincerity is considered a good measure of quality when they are transparent in the decision-making process of their study (Seale, 1999). Sincere researchers seek to paint a picture for their readers, explaining the rationale behind the methods selected, how they were conducted in a way that promotes replicability, and the challenges that arose from selecting these methods. When researchers are sincere in their work, they maintain a great deal of reflexivity and recognize personal bias toward their own study and how that may have impacted the decision-making (Emerson et al., 1995). See our section on *Reflexivity* to identify personal biases and assumptions you bring into your research.

When considering sincerity, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Have I thoroughly described and justified why my methods are the best way to answer my research question(s)?
- Did I provide enough information to allow readers to understand what I accomplished using simple terminology that is descriptive enough for another researcher to replicate the steps that I took?
- Have I situated my work among key scholars within my field?

- Have I detailed all of the unexpected challenges or limitations that I encountered during my study?
- Did I include a reflexivity statement in my final report and connect it to any literature that I used to support my methodological decisions?

Sites as arbiters of quality

Scholars who embrace this concept argue that "research takes place in, and is addressed to, a community; it is also accurately labeled because of the desire of those who discuss such research to have it serve the purposes of the community in which it was carried out, rather than simply serving the community of knowledge producers and policymakers" (Lincoln, 1995, p. 280). In other words, knowledge is relational and situated within the communities in which it is created. To seek to objectively understand the world is to work within anti-communal, individualistic, and self-serving ways. By seeking to, instead, pursue a situated and complex knowledge that incorporates other ways of knowing beyond your own is to embrace "a complex intellectual dimension, exercised for the sake of assisting the marginalized on a journey toward greater participation in common life" (Savage, 1988, p. 13). Scholars who utilize sites as arbiters of quality should also be sure to explain how they have supported the communities with whom they conduct research; you should share how you are serving them, instead of allowing readers to assume that your work has occurred in a vacuum in which you, as the researcher, entered a space and left with only the knowledge that others assisted you in producing. Lincoln (1995) argued that "research is first and foremost a community project, not a project of the academic disciplines alone (or even primarily)" (p. 282).

When considering sites as arbiters of quality, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Have I devoted sufficient space in my written report to thoroughly describe the community or population that I am serving?
- How can I give back to the populations or communities that have shared their experiences and perspectives with me?
- Have I shared how I gave back to the communities within my written report?

Transgressive validities

Lather (1993) described her goals in creating transgressive validity as a "reconceptualized validity that is grounded in theorizing our practice … fragmenting and colliding both hegemonic and oppositional codes, [her] goal is to reinscribe validity in a way that uses the anti foundational problematic to loosen the master code of positivism that continues to so shape even postpositivism" (p. 674). This concept was meant to disrupt the foundational, traditional, post/positivist concepts of reliability and validity while also adding newer conceptualizations of validity that correspond to other paradigmatic views such as poststructuralism. She argued that validity must be "a space of constructed visibility of the practices of methodology and a space of the incitement to see, an apparatus for observing the staging of the poses of methodology, a site that 'gives to be seen' the unthought in our thought" (Lather, 1993, p. 676). She divided this concept into four framings, which she also refers to as "scandalous categories" (Lather, 1993, p. 683), that we describe below. Transgressive validities are enacted in different ways, depending on which form you pursue.

Ironic validity

Lather's (1993) conceptualization of ironic validity, which she also refers to as "validity as simulacra" (p. 677) espouses "a strategy of ironic validity proliferates forms, recognizing that they are rhetorical and without foundation, post-epistemic, lacking in epistemological support" (p. 677). A simpler way to engage in this concept is to consider that we can never truly know the original, absolute, objective truth (if one does, in fact, exist), and the research that we create thereby acts as simulations, simulacra, recreations, or reprints of a real, objective reality. We are providing recreated representations of what we learned while collecting data, but what we are producing is simulations of the truth within our own research.

We have recreated Lather's ironic validity questions (see Lather, 1993, p. 685) to consider when reviewing your own work or the work of others for ironic validity:

- Have I foregrounded the insufficiencies of language in the production of meaning-making?
- Have I presented the concept of absolute truth, itself, as a problem?
- Have I acknowledged how my representations of the phenomena I am studying may be problematic or not endemic to the larger population or current time?
- Have I shared tensions that I may have found within the data as another dimension of the data?

Rhizomatic validity

Lather (1993) described rhizomatic validity, which she also referred to as Derridean rigor, as often used by researchers in order to undermine, unsettle, and center the marginalized others within a system; in doing so, the researcher generates new locally-determined norms to destabilize oppressive order (Lather, 1993). Scholars who seek to utilize rhizomatic validity concern themselves with understanding related contexts and networks of ideas and people-centered around their topic and/or participant(s). In examining rhizomatic connections and networks within your data, deeply interrogate how systemic and structural forces are at play within the world of your participants.

When considering rhizomatic validity, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- What policies are affecting participants' lives?
- What other people are involved in their experiences?
- How might you be able to explore and present those connections and contexts?

Paralogical validity

According to Lather (1993), the goal of paralogical validity "is to foster differences and let contradictions remain in tension, as opposed to the recuperation of the other into the same that is always imposed at the end of a traditional philosophy" (p. 679). With the intention to embrace complexity, the researcher "fosters heterogeneity, refusing closure" (p. 679) during the data collection and analysis process as they continue to "search for instabilities" (p. 680). Lather also uses the terms Lyotardian paralogy and neo-pragmatic validity to describe paralogical validity. Often, researchers utilizing paralogical validity will prioritize sharing the differences inherent in their data versus seeking to obtain saturation.

When considering paralogical validity, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Have I looked for conflicting perspectives within the data?
- Have i explored any tensions inherent within the data?

Voluptuous validity

Voluptuous validity, or situated validity, is the fourth of Lather's (1993) transgressive validities. Lather uses this term to describe an abundance of data—by collecting as much data as possible, we are able to view our data from everywhere, which is directly in contrast with objectivism's "view from nowhere" (p. 682). She argued that acknowledging that we will never know *everything* and that our data is therefore perpetually incomplete and tentative, allows for the space for "others to enter, the joining of partial voices" (p. 682). Researchers, therefore, engage in voluptuous validity by assuming that they are incapable of knowing everything about a situation, and must continuously engage in both their topic and reflexive practice. In order to practice voluptuous validity, we must continually reflect upon ourselves, our decisions, and our perspectives about our data with the understanding that we will never completely understand our topic and/or participant(s). We may seek to continuously gain more information about our data.

When considering voluptuous validity, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Have I exhausted avenues of obtaining data regarding my topic?
- Have I ensured that my findings are written in such a way as to not portray an absolute or complete understanding of my topic?

Triangulation

Triangulation is the practice of using multiple data sources to obtain various answers and points of view to your research question. Typically selected prior to recruitment, the researchers intentionally identify and select specific individuals they aim to be represented in the study or multiple data sources that can be used in tandem to create a situated truth among them. Participants or data sources may be of similar or opposite views to provide a variety of context and depth to answer the research questions from multiple lenses. The order in which participants contribute to the study may be determined based on relational power between the participants, by order of participant influence, or completely at random. It's critical to provide opportunities for representation from multiple sources and individuals. Denzin (1978) suggests that when used appropriately, triangulation is a method to increase the overall credibility of your work.

When considering triangulation, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- How can I counter-balance the voice of one participant with the voice of another? Or the findings from one source with another?
- Have I spent time with each data source? Each participant? Each document?
- Have I been intentional with my recruitment methods in order to ensure representative inclusion among the sources selected to represent the population or phenomenon that I am studying?
- Have I provided a rationale for spending more time on one data source as compared to another?

Voice

Voice refers to the process of weaving multiple voices throughout your research. Lincoln (1995) argued that we must consider "to who speaks, for whom, to whom, for what purpose … who speaks for those who do not have access to the corridors of knowledge or the venues of the academic disciplines?" (p. 282). Further, LeCompte (1993) argued that qualitative researchers must "seek out the silenced because their perspectives are often counter-hegemonic" (p. 10). We must seek to involve ourselves deeply with our study participants in order to both accurately reflect their voices and understand the contexts from which they speak in order to ensure that our work does not silence or further marginalize them. We also see voice enacted through polyvocality, which refers to the process of including multiple voices and interpretations of your work. Allowing alternate voices to speak through your work, and therefore presenting nuanced representations of thought—and perhaps thereby embracing the tension created by lack of consensus—shows the strength of your work, while also resisting silence, disengagement, and marginalization (Lincoln, 1995).

It is one of the authors, Leia's, biggest pet peeves when others say that they want their work to "give voice to others." This determinant of quality, along with our team, argues that others already have a voice—we simply must choose to elevate those voices

through our research. One of the easiest ways to enact voice within your work is to simply include more words from your participants than from yourself within your findings section. Choosing to allow your participants to speak to your readers through gratuitous use of quotes enables your readers to understand your participants' experiences through their own words, while your interpretations serve as the glue that connects the quotes together. While it is true that we, as researchers, are responsible for interpreting the data, utilizing *voice* by including quotes from participants allows us to demonstrate that our findings are meaningful. When pursuing polyvocality, we typically track how often we have quoted each participant within our studies, ensuring that each individual's thoughts are represented throughout the report.

When considering voice, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Have I included many quotes in order to demonstrate my findings?
- Have I ensured that one participant is not quoted substantially more than others?
- How can I weave the voices of all participants in such a way as to elevate all of their voices?

Worthy topic

Researchers who seek to claim that their topic is *worthy* must consider the significance of the study as it relates to today's literature, society, and personal events. They strive to extend what has been previously known within the literature to newer findings, demonstrating that the traditional findings are still relevant in today's world. Rather than repeating studies or continuously testing theories in the same way, a worthy topic is one that leaves readers intrigued by the work that has been produced (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Researchers must consider new perspectives and applications of established knowledge in order to add to the field. We may get hung up on the easy topics, resources, and methodologies that are popular, but it is the researcher who strives for a worthy topic to guide their research study that continues to push the boundaries in their field.

When considering if your topic is worthy, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Have I considered how this research may significantly contribute to a meaningful, relevant, topic in today's world?
- If I am studying an already well-researched topic, how does my work maintain the interest of readers? How does it add to the ongoing conversation?

Conclusion

Scholars have long debated how to determine quality within qualitative research without consensus. Trainor and Graue (2013) argued that these difficulties result from (1) disagreement as to what makes *good* qualitative research, (2) methodological training and practice primarily embracing quantitative, postpositivist commitments, and (3) the fact that qualitative researchers often seek to understand culturally-mediated and -defined notions of what constitutes as evidence. In fact, researchers often struggle to agree on even the most basic of vocabulary; for example, while some sholars have argued that the notion of *validity*, which stems from traditional quantitative practices, is incompatible with qualitative research (Cho and Trent, 2020; Kvale, 1995; Ravitch and Carl, 2019; Trainor and Graue, 2013; Wolcott, 1990), others have argued for embracing the term in order to redefine it (Lather, 1993). Therefore, it is each scholar's responsibility to choose and justify the quality determinants that fit their theoretical, ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments. While this level of freedom may seem overwhelming, we argue that it is this very reprieve from traditional postpositivist practices that gives qualitative research powerful impact.

A trip to the salad bar

In section two, we discussed one of our authors, Leia's, metaphor of designing a qualitative project as constructing the perfect salad at the salad bar. Each researcher engages in this process differently, and therefore, even scholars who choose to use the same quality determinants (ingrediants) will likely construct their study (salad) differently. For example, Cain and Velasco (2021) described their data quality efforts as follows;

> We utilized triangulation (Tracy, 2010), member checking (Tracy, 2010), and reflexivity (Tracy, 2010). Instead of pursuing triangulation in a positivist sense to validate the collected data (Creswell, 2012), we pursued triangulation as a method to "understand the multiple perspectives available" (Glesne, 2011, p. 47). Each of us as the researchers shared our perspectives about Gray's story, and we worked together to negotiate our meanings and understandings in order to build a more credible meaning from the stories provided. Further, we pursued member-checking (Lather, 1986) by sharing our findings with Gray in order to ensure that we were presenting their story correctly, and that we had correctly understood the meanings and connections that they had wanted to portray. Finally, we the researchers shared a reflexivity journal document in Google Drive where we could write about our own thoughts and processes throughout data collection and analysis (pp. 363–364).

In this article, Cain and Velasco (2021) combined triangulation (determinant 3.21), member checking (determinant 3.7), and reflexivity (determinant 3.11). This fit the study perfectly, as it was carried out under an interpretivist paradigm and allowed Cain

and Velasco to consistently check on interpretations made from the data both with each other and with the participant. Other researchers may have utilized these determinants in alternative ways, or combined them with other determinants.

Implications for researchers in education

In this chapter, we sought to explore the complexity of quality in qualitative research and listed 23 widely-used quality determinants. Un/fortunately, we do not anticipate a consensus being accomplished in the field; qualitative methodologists often resist uniformity, choosing instead to embrace the gray areas inherent in the inquiry process—though this lack of clarity can at times feel overwhelming for learners. Previously, scholars have tried to create a unified framework of quality within qualitative research (e.g., Tracy, 2010), but have encountered resistance to their efforts (e.g., Albusaidi, 2019; Gordon and Patterson, 2013).

When engaging in qualitative research, it is imperative for researchers to critically engage with the entanglements they create among theoretical, ontological, epistemological, and methodological decisions and commitments to ensure that they are presenting an argument in which all of the individual pieces align. We hope that this chapter provides a starting point for further learning and exploration of quality in qualitative research.

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