

Hello! I want to welcome everyone to this presentation on Quality and Rigor in Qualitative Research. I'm Dr. Elizabeth Pope, an Assistant Professor of Educational Research and I specialize in qualitative research. I'm going to talk with you in this screencast about how to assess quality in qualitative research.

### **Learning Outcomes**

I have several goals for us in this presentation. I've listed them here as learning outcomes. By the end of this presentation, you should:

- Make the paradigm shift necessary to understand quality and rigor in qualitative research.
- Know how quantitative approaches to validity and reliability do not apply to qualitative research.
- Understand the different approaches to establishing quality in qualitative research.
- Recognize what methods are needed to have a rigorous qualitative study.

### **Assessing Quality in Qualitative Research**

\*\*As Lincoln & Guba (2011) explain, “Nowhere can the conversation about paradigm differences be more fertile than in the extended controversy about validity” (p. 120). What this means is that how researchers answer the question “What makes good qualitative research?” varies across paradigm, methodology, and focus. In this presentation I will talk with you about the primary viewpoints and ways of assessing quality and rigor. \*\*A major difference you may notice throughout this presentation is the use of different terms to assess quality. For example:

- \*\*Lincoln and Guba explain in the 2011 handbook of qualitative research that the paradigm you follow will determine the terminology you will use to assess the quality of your research project.
  - They discuss how the positivist and postpositivist paradigms use the term “rigor” to assess external validity, reliability, and objectivity of their studies.
  - Critical theorists will focus on historical situatedness, erosion of ignorance and misapprehensions, and action stimulus to assess quality
  - Constructivist paradigms will attempt to provide examples of trustworthiness and authenticity
- \*\*In their book *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Creswell & Creswell explain quality for qualitative research using the terms validity and reliability, two very quantitative terms.
- \*\*Finally, Tracy's 2010 article on validity develops 8 “Big-Tent” criteria that can be used to assess quality of qualitative research regardless of which paradigm you follow.

### **Validity: An Extended Agenda**

Let's begin by discussing what validity means to Lincoln and Guba, two premier scholars in qualitative research. \*\*The use of the term “validity” is contentious in qualitative research. Many researchers are moving away from the term because of the quantitative overtones. I myself do not use it and require that my students work to establish the quality and rigor of their study, rather than the validity of it. However, for the purposes of this portion of the presentation, we

will review the writings from Lincoln & Guba, who discuss what “validity” is from a qualitative stance.

\*\*They write that validity can be an irritating concept to grasp for qualitative researchers, but it cannot be dismissed because researchers must be able to answer the question of if their findings are sufficiently authentic that they can trust themselves in acting upon the implications of their findings.

## **2 Simultaneous Arguments**

Lincoln and Guba explain that there are 2 simultaneous arguments on validity going on.

\*\*Validity through research methods: The first, typically found in the positivist paradigm, argues for rigor through the application of the research method. This means there are methodological criteria to be followed during the construction and application of your research methods to help establish the “validity” of your study. Translated out of this term, this argument tells us that there are methodological criteria for quality and rigor. For example – following good formatting for interviews, being serious about your prolonged time in the field and participant observations, developing rich data, etc.

\*\*Validity through interpretation: The second argument is the one that has been taken up for more discussion in recent qualitative research. This form of establishing “validity” requires the researcher to be able to answer the questions: “Are we interpretively rigorous? Can our co-created constructions be trusted to provide some purchase on some important human phenomenon? Do our findings point to action that can be taken on the part of research participants to benefit themselves or their particular social contexts?” This argument for validity is more commonly taken up in constructivist and critical lenses of theory. In translating this away from the term “validity,” this means that the rigor of your study should be evident through your interpretation of your findings. This is what leads to good quality research.

### **Shifting our Thinking from Validity to Trustworthiness**

As I mentioned previously, validity is a very quantitative term with very quantitative criteria. In qualitative research, these criteria don’t apply because qualitative researchers conduct naturalistic inquiry (research within the natural world) and generally do not attempt to conduct research from an objectivist standpoint. Instead, they approach research and data collection with the understanding that in order to understand human experience and the natural world, we must include human understandings and experiences within our data, and these are typically more subjective than objective in nature. As explained by Erlandson et al. (1993), “The naturalistic paradigm, valuing as it does the separate realities that have been created by individuals, must also value the way these realities are responded to and the ways in which they enable individuals to respond productively to their environments” (p. 132).

What this means is that in order to conduct and assess quality in qualitative research, a paradigm shift is necessary. Validity and reliability are terms not typically used. New terminology

represents this shift in understanding of how to establish that your research is of high quality and rigorous (i.e. is it good?).

\*\*In qualitative research, many researchers will attempt to establish the quality and rigor of their study through “trustworthiness” rather than “validity.” The standards of trustworthiness are a way that researchers can be responsive to the multiple realities within the naturalistic paradigm and still establish the quality and rigor of their study (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 132).

Trustworthiness is closely connected with rigor. The general idea is that the more rigorous your study is the more trustworthy your findings are. So, what is trustworthiness?

\*\*Trustworthiness is a term that was developed by Lincoln and Guba in 1985 to replace the concept of validity in qualitative research.

\*\*Trustworthiness is important because “it allows researchers to describe the virtues of qualitative terms outside of the parameters that are typically applied in quantitative research” (Given & Saumure, 2008, p. 895)

- To do this, Lincoln and Guba translated commonly used quantitative terms of validity into more appropriate terms to be used for related concepts in qualitative trustworthiness.

### **Establishing Trustworthiness: A Translation of Terms**

Erlandson et. al., explain that “establishing trustworthiness enables a naturalistic study to make a reasonable claim to methodological soundness” (p. 131). The table you see here is from Erlandson et al.’s 1993 book titled *Doing Naturalistic Inquiry: A Guide to Methods*. Setting specific criteria of good research, the table takes the “conventional” or quantitative term and translates the concept into appropriate concepts for qualitative researchers in confirming the trustworthiness of their study. The final column includes techniques or methods qualitative researchers use to establish these criteria.

\*\*The term credibility is used for the criteria of the truth value of a study and replaces the quantitative concept of internal validity. “A credible study is one where the researchers have accurately and richly described the phenomenon in question” (Given & Saumure, p. 895). This ensures that the data is accurately represented. Credibility is assessed by answering the question of if the researcher’s presentation of the phenomenon under study is deemed correct by the participants who experienced the phenomenon (i.e. the participants whom the researcher worked with to generate their data).

\*\*To establish the applicability of a study, transferability replaces generalizability or external validity. Researchers focus on generating detailed data sets and describing them richly so that other researchers can ascertain the findings’ ability to be applicable, or transferred, to other research contexts. This determines the study’s worthiness not by the generalizability of its results to broader contexts but by how well other researchers can transfer the findings to alternative contexts. Going back to the writings of Erlandson et al., think about things this way, “every context shifts over time as the persons in the context, their constructions of reality, and the relationships among them also shift (even if the individuals are the same)... [thus] the naturalistic researcher maintains that no true generalization is really possible; all observations are

defined by the specific contexts in which they occur” (Erlandson et al., p. 32). However, this doesn’t mean the knowledge one researcher obtains from a particular context isn’t relevant to another, the authors continue:

Rather than attempting to select isolated variables that are equivalent across contexts, the naturalistic researcher attempts to describe in great detail the interrelationships and intricacies of the context being studied. Thus, the result of the study is a description that will not be replicated anywhere. The “thick description” that has been generated, however, enables observers of other contexts to make tentative judgments about applicability of certain observations for their contexts and to form “working hypotheses” to guide empirical inquiry in those contexts. (Erlandson et al., pp. 32-33)

**\*\*Dependability** replaces reliability in confirming the consistency of a study. Being able to reliably reproduce findings in the exact same context or using the exact same procedures is exceedingly difficult for qualitative researchers. Through dependability “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” (Given & Samure, p. 895). So, if researchers attempt to conduct a similar study in a similar context, dependability indicates that findings would be repeated in the new study.

In quantitative research, reliability looks at the predictability, stability, or accuracy of findings based on a researcher’s ability to replicate the study. However, as Erlandson et al. explain:

The naturalistic researcher believes that observed instability may be attributed not only to error but also to reality shifts. Thus, the quest is not for invariance but for “trackable variance” (Guba, 1981), variabilities that can be ascribed to particular sources (error, reality shifts, better insights, etc.). (p. 34)

**\*\*Confirmability** replaces objectivity in an attempt to establish the neutrality of a researcher. Qualitative researchers do not attempt to declare the objectivity of their findings or observations because they recognize that no methodology can be completely separated from the researcher. So, researchers rely on the confirmability of the data within the study. Confirmability “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” (Given & Saumure, p. 895).

### **Additional Versions of Quality (No Slide)**

Establishing trustworthiness through the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability has become the most traditional form of quality and rigor in qualitative research. However, there are other methods used that are based on differing paradigms within qualitative research. These methods are equally valid and researchers may find them to be more appropriate depending on the type of study they’re conducting. While I will not review them in this presentation, you can read about authenticity and ethical relationships in the script. There are additional views such as crystallization and transgression that researchers use as well.

### **Authenticity**

The first attempts to establish quality through authenticity of a study. In this process, researchers typically are working within a constructivist paradigm. Researchers attempt to establish that the conduct of research and the evaluation of the data are both “genuine and credible” with respect to the participants, political implications, and the social implications of the research (James, 2008, p. 45). There are 5 areas of quality as authenticity.

1. **Fairness** attempts to establish balance between stakeholders and the participants whose voices are included in the data and write-up of a study. “This is a deliberate attempt to prevent marginalization, to act affirmatively with respect to inclusion, and to act with energy to ensure that all voices in the inquiry effort had a chance to be represented in any texts to have their stories treated fairly and with balance” (Lincoln & Guba, 2011, p. 122)
2. **Ontological and educative authenticity** focus on quality and rigor being constructed through relationships with your participants and the people who your participants have relationships with. The researcher in this case should raise these people’s awareness of the study purpose, methods and findings so the researcher doesn’t leave them in the dark. In this way they really are participants and not just subjects of research.
3. **Catalytic and tactical authenticities** assess quality by the actions taken by participants because of the research. These actions include research participants acting for social change “in the forms of emancipatory community action” (p. 122) or the researcher training the participants in specific forms of political or social actions.

### **Ethical Relationships**

Establishing quality through ethical relationships refers to the fact that there are connections between how researchers know what they know and the relationships they have with their participants. This means there’s a relationship between epistemology and ethics that researchers need to attend to in order to establish validity. **There are seven standards for this (p. 123):**

1. Positionality or standpoint judgments
2. Specific discourse communities and research sites as arbiters of quality
3. Voice, or the extent to which a text has the quality of polyvocality
4. Critical subjectivity
5. Reciprocity, or the extent to which the research relationship becomes reciprocal rather than hierarchal
6. Sacredness, or the profound regard for how science can (and does) contribute to human flourishing
7. And sharing of the perquisites of privilege that accrue to our positions as academics with university positions

### **8 “Big Tent” Criteria**

Finally, Sarah Tracy (2010) approaches quality from another perspective. She provides her viewpoint on the benefits of criteria of quality specific to certain paradigms, theories, or communities vs. general criteria. For instance, narrative studies generally have less than 10 participants. While this is good quality for narrative research, it may be an indication of poor quality in other methodologies. Tracy’s hope is that a set of “universal” markers of quality will discriminate between “qualitative ends [and] means” (p. 839). She explains that her goal in presenting these universal markers of quality and that this “provides an expansive or ‘big tent’

structure for qualitative quality while still celebrating the complex differences amongst various paradigms” (p. 839).

Her criteria (p. 840) are:

1. \*\*A worthy topic is a topic that is relevant, timely, significant and interesting
2. \*\*A study follows rich rigor if it uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex theoretical constructs, data and time in the field, sample(s), context(s), and data collection and analysis processes
3. \*\*Sincerity in a study is characterized by self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher as well as transparency about the methods and challenges
4. \*\*Credibility in a study is marked by thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontextual) knowledge and showing rather than telling; triangulation or crystallization; multivocality; and member reflections
5. \*\*Resonance in a study means that the research must influence, affect, or move particular readers or a variety of audiences through aesthetic, evocative representation; naturalistic generalizations; and transferable findings.
6. \*\*Studies that have significant contributions provide contributions to the literature conceptually/theoretically, practically, morally, methodologically, or heuristically
7. \*\*Researchers are ethical when they consider procedural ethics (such as human subjects guidelines), situational and culturally specific ethics, relational ethics, and existing ethics (such as leaving the scene and sharing the research)
8. \*\*A study has meaningful coherence if it achieves what it purports to be about, uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals, and meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other.

### **Strategies to Establish Quality**

As you may have noticed, there are several areas of overlap in establishing quality in qualitative research. Here are some areas that are common to many, if not all, qualitative researchers in distinguishing quality. These methods have different strengths and establish various aspects of quality in research. If you develop a qualitative study, you will likely use many, if not all, of these methods to confirm the quality and rigor of your research.

### **Resources**

Establishing quality in qualitative research can be complex but it is essential to proving the credibility and trustworthiness of your study.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Erlandson, D. A., Harris, E. L., Skipper, B. L., & Allen, S. D. (1993). *Doing naturalistic inquiry: A guide to methods*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

- Given, L. M., & Saumure, K. (2008). Trustworthiness. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 895-896). doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n470>
- James, N. (2008). Authenticity. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (p. 45). doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n26>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2011). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. In Y. S. Lincoln & E. G. Guba (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 87-128).
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 16(10), 837-851. doi: 10.1177/1077800410383121