"It doesn't count because it's subjective!" (Re)conceptualising the qualitative researcher role as 'validity' embraces subjectivity

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Welcome

I am pleased as well as apprehensive about presenting the following paper as an Advanced Paper Discussion option in the AARE conference. The pleasure arises from at last having a paper to present for discussion. It has taken me quite a few months to prepare it; the field of validity in qualitative research turned out to be much larger and more complex than I thought when first embarking on this mission. And I can't claim to have a firm grasp of this complexity either, hence my apprehension in presenting what I have and being as reliant on the literature as I have. However, I do welcome you to the paper and look forward to your reactions - your questions, criticisms, alternative propositions, further readings, or whatever.

I hope to hear from you soon. Please do not feel as though the only legitimate response to the paper is a comprehensive critique. There may be one part of the paper you may wish to respond to. I will welcome that. Maybe my interpretation of a particular concept is what interests you. Maybe there's something about the case I am trying to make that you believe could be strengthened. By all means be specific and brief if you so desire. I will walk into my office each morning with great expectation: Who has contacted me today and what do they say?

So, I hope to hear from you soon and look forward to meeting you in Adelaide in November.

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Abstract

The impetus for this paper arose from a recent experience where a graduate student, having qualitatively researched a government department policy, found the research dismissed by a department officer as being subjective, meaning biased and unreliable. The argument in this paper arises from the persuasiveness of the literature of the last decade or so, challenging the assumption that validity is (procedurally) satisfied when such techniques as member checks, triangulation and the weighing of evidence are made integral to research designs. This assumption is flawed. "Validity is not a commodity that can be purchased with techniques" (Maxwell, 1992). Techniques impute objectivity, yet what we create through our research is socially constituted; "we can secure no unmediated grasp of things as they really are" (Eisner, 1991). The virtue of subjectivity (Peshkin, 1988) is in how it can meaningfully shape rather than distort research accounts. However, such meaningfulness demands that
we qualitative researchers "investigate ourselves while we are investigating others" (Berg and Smith, 1988). It has been through such insights from the literature, then, that I have begun to map out the possibilities of the self-reflexive researcher role - a role that theoretically sees validity embracing subjectivity, while at the same time being "trustworthy enough to be relied upon [by research audiences] for their own work" (Mishler, 1990).

Introduction: the fundamental validity question

The motivation for this paper was essentially the demand, from both personal experience and recent literature, to take greater account than I have previously of the thinking and the doing of research validation in qualitative research studies.

I would be surprised if the title of this paper, 'It doesn't count because it's subjective!', did not ring true as capturing either the experience of submitting a qualitative research report (especially as a commissioned applied research report or an evaluation research report), or the gnawing doubts in the doing of qualitative research and especially the verifying of qualitative 'findings'. These doubts can relate to the feeling of being an intruder after you have negotiated access to the research site. They can be associated with the difficulties in deciding what to observe, what to record, what to analyse, who to speak to, or the sense of insecurity about the less-than-transparent reasoning behind what you begin to progressively focus on (and not focus on) as important sources of data. Doubts about accuracy, representation and fairness have always permeated my research practices.

Maxwell (1992, p.179) pointedly sums up these doubts with the fundamental validity question: Why should we believe what you report? Or, paraphrasing Altheide and Johnson (1994, p.485 and p.488), Where are you the researcher coming from in this research? What's the basis of your knowledge claims? And how can your interpretations be taken as solid findings?

'Truth' and 'reality' checks

Encompassed in these questions are assumptions about how we can ascertain truth and certainty when the distorting influences of the subjectivity (or the multiple subjectivities) of the qualitative researcher are recognised in the interpretive mission that s/he pursues. They also beg the question of what we mean by 'truth' and 'certainty'. That is to say, the gnawing doubts I have experienced when constructing my research reports have been implicitly resting on a belief that there is a truth about some human activity that can be identified and portrayed in writing by the qualitative researcher provided s/he is skilled enough to do so. It is this belief that elicits anxiety about my reports being labelled 'subjective', meaning they are based on selective attention that is determined by my personal values and interests (or, more emotively, my biases and prejudices). My anxiety matches discussions in the literature about the Cartesian anxiety.

The Cartesian anxiety arises from the desire for certainty; the search and identification of foundational 'truths'; the techniques for ascertaining how things really are. If such truths and certainties can be ascertained, an unquestioned scientific basis for defining (and controlling) education will be attained. The anxiety is in the realisation, however, that we have no methods or models that account for how things really are. As Phillips (1987) has asserted: "In general it must be recognised that there is no procedure that will regularly (or always) yield either sound data or true conclusions" (cited in Maxwell, 1992, p.280). At issue here is the ontological realist assumption that there is a single reality 'out there' that can be known. This is the assumption that is foundational to empiricism in its various guises.
On reflection, then, my doubts and concerns about the validity of my qualitative accounts have arisen from my taken-for-granted allegiance to a realist ontology; that there is a correspondence between what I write and what's 'out there'. They have been supposedly demonstrated through the adoption of a range of techniques, most prominently member checking, triangulation and the weighing of evidence, that really have had the effect of authorising my reports as accurate because these techniques of validation are prominent in the literature (see for example Lancy, 1993, Miles and Huberman, 1994, Potter, 1996). It is time for me to stop posturing (Wolcott, 1992).

As an initial step to reconceptualising my understanding of validity I have been struck by the provocativeness of such insights as:

"Validity is not a commodity that can be purchased by techniques ..." (Brinberg and McGrath, as cited in Maxwell, 1992, p.280).

A complementary position is put by Sandelowski (1993), too, who discredits the translation of validity into techniques as the "illusion of technique" (p.3). And in providing the case for imputing such techniques as illusory, Sandelowski along with Flick (1992), Denzin (1997) and Bloor (1997) expose a number of flaws associated with the techniques of triangulation and member checks. These scholars have demonstrated, amongst other things that, firstly, triangulation is not a strategy of validation but an alternative to validation. Moreover, the various forms of triangulation can produce at best only an expanded interpretive base in a study rather than an objective account (an account which assumes a single, objective reality). As Patton (1980) concludes when examining the difficulties of triangulating different types of data, "There is no magic in triangulation" (p.330).

Secondly, many criticisms have been documented about the use of member checks as an assumed validation technique. A number of these surround the interactional dynamics associated with researcher-researched relations, the normative constraints of social etiquette, and the time-bound or provisional nature of members' perceptions. As Bloor (1997) summarises, "Member validation is a many-splendoured thing, but it is not validation" (p.48).

Many of the criticisms levelled at triangulation and member checks also apply to the technique of 'weighing evidence', especially those related to the temporal and multi-perspectival nature of data collection in qualitative studies.

Overall then, as usefully summarised by Mishler (1990, p.417):

"Validation has come to be recognised as problematic in a deep theoretical sense, rather than as a technical problem to be solved by rigorous rules and procedures."

In order to come to grips with the foundations of my gnawing doubts, then, it is important to move beyond this initial step of the translation of validation into techniques, and begin to consider the more fundamental theoretical bases behind the contested concept.

'Validity' and perspectivity

I am indebted to the writings of Smith (1992), Eisner (1991) and Schwandt (1993) in helping me evaluate my past practices of qualitative research in terms of both their ontological and epistemological bases. Here are a three insights from this collection of papers that are beginning to give me a base for reconceptualising the notion of validity.
Knowledge is perspectival

The sense I make of the world is not only made, that is, socially and discursively constituted rather than discovered, but what I observe and how I explain it cannot escape the predilections, values and cultural assumptions I bring to it. Knowledge is perspectival. Or, as Altheide and Johnson (1994) put it, "all knowledge is perspectival ... the perspectival nature of knowledge is an obdurate fact of ethnography [or qualitative research in all its forms]" (p.490).

Under threat, here, is the assumption that an objective, detached and value-free understanding of phenomena is possible. When we accept that knowledge is perspectival we reject the traditional correspondence theory of 'truth'; that there are absolute truths. We reject, therefore, the conventional meaning of 'validity'.

Let me add some weight to this apparent epistemological heresy by citing a number of excerpts from the literature that I have found to be compelling:

"... reality is out there, but ... our descriptions of it are not and never can be ...[T]here is no privileged way, or privileged position, from which to understand the world" (Smith, 1992, p.101).

"There is no outside detached standpoint from which we gather and present brute data. When we try to understand the cultural world, we are dealing with interpretations and interpretations of interpretations" (Rabinow and Sullivan, cited in Schwandt, 1993, p.283). This epistemological position reflects the demands of the hermeneutic circle of interpretation; that we are interpreting beings, that "every interpretation is itself based on another interpretation", and thus "there is no 'final' interpretation" (Schwandt, 1997, p.64).

"As observers and interpreters of the world, we are inextricably part of it; we cannot step outside our own experience to obtain some observer-independent account of what we experience" (Maxwell, 1992, p.283).

"Related to the impossibility of knowing the world in its pristine state - a kind of immaculate perception - is the framework-dependent character of perception. Perception of the world is influenced by skill, point of view, focus, language and framework. The eye is not only a part of the brain, it is a part of tradition" (Eisner, 1991, p.46).

If knowledge is perspectival, then what is the meaning of validation as a process of assurance and certainty? The import of this question is in the spectre of relativism it raises. Rather than sink into the indeterminacy of an 'anything goes' relativism, the perspectival nature of knowledge would seem to require a reconceptualisation of validity to include an evaluation of the appropriateness of a particular perspective rather than merely the 'truths' it produces (Vander Platt, 1995, p.90). For example, Eisner (1983, p.14) has made a case for appropriate to mean 'instrumental utility'. That is, we can ask what a particular perspective and the knowledge it produces will enable us to do. A morally robust translation of this criterion is argued for later in this paper.

2) 'Virtuous subjectivity'

Permeating a recognition of the nexus between knowledge and perspective is the impact of the particular subjective baggage a researcher brings to her/his project. Peshkin (1988) has addressed the unavoidable presence of one's subjectivity, or multiple subjectivities, in a self-disclosing paper entitled 'Virtuous subjectivity'. In this paper, the virtue of subjectivity resides
in the conscious realisation and declaration of the reasoning and evidence that influences the selected focus and crafted features of a research account. As Peshkin notes:

"I feel at liberty to spin a particular story - the gift of my subjectivity - but not out of thin air; my story must be borne out by facts that are potentially available to any other researcher" (p.278).

Peshkin illustrates the moral inclination in his subjectivity when reviewing the personal dispositions (related to his class, gender and value orientation) that gave shape to how he conducted his research and wrote his interpretive account about the Christian fundamentalist doctrine of Bethany High School community. As he quipped: "Bethany gored me" (p.276). What he selected to observe, interpret and write about gored his liberal disposition and Jewish heritage. The result was a reasoned and evidenced account. And as he argued, "If I were a born-again Christian studying Bethany, I could find other true things to write about, other true stories to tell" (p.277).

The central moral imperative, backed by evidence and argument making the account compelling, is a virtue to be nurtured not a prejudice that distorts. As Peshkin (1988) puts it:

"Those oriented towards idealism [ie, a non-realist ontology] do not want to exalt prejudice, subjectivity's stepchild; their orientation derives from a recognition of the impossibility of value-free research, the consequent inevitability of researcher-object interaction in social research, and, most important for my purpose in this chapter, the sense that subjectivity is the salt of creativity" (p.268).

But this is not an unbridled subjectivity. Peshkin, in making a distinction between subjectivity and subjectivism, argues for care by invoking injunctions on one's subjectivity in order to avoid the possible dysfunctional influence of personality and sentimentality.

And this is where a subsequent paper by Barone (1992) is important. Barone is critical of what appear as inconsistencies in Peshkin's position. The inconsistencies Barone argues are two-fold:

1. For Peshkin to laud the virtues of subjectivity on the one hand but see the necessity of invoking review procedures on the other is self-contradictory. As Barone concludes, Peshkin "seems drawn to the kind of futile exorcismic methodological rituals at which the objectivists have traditionally excelled" (p.30).

1 The reification of the binary opposites of objective and subjective is no longer tenable. As Barone persuasively argues, along with the death of the idea of objective truths, "subjectivity [too] is a goner. The term is no longer needed as a foil for its discredited dominant twin" (p.29).

In my personal search for a sound base from which to (re)conceptualise validity in my role as a qualitative researcher, the import of Barone's critique is with the implications it carries at the level of ontology. Ontologically, the choice - realist or idealist - is now anachronistic. As reinforced by Altheide and Johnson (1994), "the dichotomy of realism/idealism [is] incompatible with the nature of lived experience and interpretation" (p.489). Barone argues that interpretation, or the construction of meaning, is a dialectical process because:
"Reality' resides neither within an objective external world nor within the subjective mind of the knower, but within dynamic transactions between the two. To inquire about 'reality', therefore, is always to inquire about the construction of meaning within a particular situation that is being existentially transformed" (p.31).

With the death of objectivity and subjectivity, then, interpretation resides "at the lived border of reality and representation" (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997, p.101). Or as Mumby and Spitzack (1983) put it, "it is impossible to separate reality from reality-as-described" (p.162). There is an emerging consensus among qualitative research methodologists about the naming of this ontological position and its implications for criteria for assessing qualitative research. It has been called 'subtle realism' (Hammersley, 1992a), 'critical realism' (Maxwell, 1992) and 'analytic realism' (Altheide and Johnson, 1994). In addition, Altheide and Johnson (1994) and Hammersley (1992a) argue similarities between their ontological positions and that of pragmatism. I am disposed to use the name pragmatism. It is a term which represents, among other things, a rejection of the correspondence theory of 'truth' favouring instead the pursuit of practical wisdom (Schwandt, 1993, p.15). But, following Cherryholmes (1988, p.151) and Barone (1992, p.32), this is not a 'vulgar pragmatism', one which privileges functional efficiency based on the unreflective acceptance of conventional standards. Instead it is a 'critical pragmatism' that is proposed because it attributes practical wisdom with reflexivity (which will be discussed shortly), thus making problematic the assumptions, visions and moral values informing our practical choices as much as the utility or workability of those choices. For now it is important to make clear that by accepting the demise of the binary opposites objectivity/subjectivity and realism/idealism, the conventional epistemological bases for assessing between 'truth' claims comes into question. It is to this that we now turn.

3) Not 'truth' but 'goodness'

Since the critical pragmatist rejects any notion of 'truth' that can be known independent of the values, interests and purposes of the inquirer, then there is no standard epistemological base from which to judge the outcomes of such inquiry. That is to say, the epistemological question, 'Did I get it right?', becomes a nonsense question when the concept of 'right' is unavoidably linked to the values and interests shaping the purpose and conduct of the research. Epistemology cannot be used to arbitrate between belief and opinion (Smith, 1992). The base that is argued for (by Rorty, 1985; Smith, 1992; and Schwandt, 1993 in particular) is a moral one. As Smith (1992) asserts, "the pursuit of knowledge must be understood in practical and moral terms" (p.102).

A critical pragmatist stance, then, rejects the dominant empiricist goal of research as generating knowledge or adding to scientific theorising, and instead proposes a moral base of reasoning. As put by Schwandt (1993):

"[The goal of qualitative inquiry] is not to produce knowledge of the social world as an entity but to engage in knowledge making as a human activity. This is fundamentally a normative undertaking. It requires that we come to terms with a sense of moral purpose and responsibility in human inquiry" (p.19).

So, rather than qualitative research pursuing an empiricist logic in documenting and analysing information to a sufficient standard to provide valid accounts, a moral regulative ideal has a utilitarian purpose. The drive here is for sufficient compelling evidence in order "to persuade one another of the value or goodness of a way of thinking" (Schwandt, 1993, p.20). It is to promote deliberations and reflections around such questions as:
"What kind of a person do I become if I decide to accept one interpretation of a situation over another? and, collectively, What kind of a society will we become if we choose one interpretation as opposed to another?" (Smith, 1992, p.104).

By no longer having confidence in epistemology to arbitrate the validity of knowledge claims, a case is emerging where the process of validation can arbitrate on the basis of 'the value or goodness of a way of thinking'. Let us see what guidance about the features of this process can be distilled from the literature discussing pragmatism and validation in qualitative research. This is especially the writings of Maxwell, Altheide and Johnson, Mishler, and Barone.

Reconceptualising 'validity' in qualitative research

From the above, it is now much clearer to me that a theoretical rationale that recognises the links between perspectivity, morality and utility, makes both the concept and the procedures of validity, as derived from an empiricist logic, incompatible with qualitative research. A reconceptualisation is needed. If I am to approach my next qualitative research project with confidence, I need to be clear about the criteria I use to assess my role, my methods and the integrity of my written accounts. And the start of this reconceptualisation is the term itself because it would seem that the 'validity' "is not a useful [term] in research that seeks understanding and meaning" (Munro, 1995, p.149).

1) Not 'validity' but trustworthiness

You will have noticed that the word 'validity', both in the title of this paper and scattered throughout the text so far, has been placed in parentheses. This has been done in recognition of its origins.

'Validity' is a term which has its origins in an empiricist orthodoxy (Guba, 1981). Its meaning, therefore, has been derived from such practices as experimentation. Eisenhart and Howe (1992) pose the question, "should experimentalist conceptions [of validity] be applied to alternative research designs? If so, how? If not, what conceptions should be applied instead?" (p.644). Jackson (1990) sides with Wolcott (1990) in stressing "that validity is essentially a test makers concept and is therefore best left to those who pursue that line of work..." (p.154). 'Validity' is thus presented in parentheses to reflect its empiricist heritage as well as the relentless consistency of the questioning that accounts can be produced that correspond to how things really are.

The linguistic turn in qualitative studies has been influential in demonstrating the constitutive power of language; that by changing how we name things, we also change how we conceive them. Freeman (1993) stresses the significance of this power-language-meaning triumvirate when he argues the veracity of "the double term, renaming experience/reconstructing practice". As he puts it:

"To call it simply renaming reduces the process to a technical one of finding new words for familiar ways of doing things. To call it simply reconstructing overlooks the pivotal role which language plays in the development of new understandings in practice" (p.486).

When considering renaming experience/reconceptualising practice in relation to the notion of 'validity', we give recognition to a range of attempts over the past decade to reconceptualise 'validity' to reflect the demands of critical pragmatism (or at least subtle realism). Examples of these include Lincoln and Guba (1985) arguing for 'trustworthiness' as the regulative standard, Hammersley (1992b) preferring the 'plausibility' of knowledge claims, and Lincoln (1995) arguing for 'authenticity' as the standard for constructivist research.
At this point I too am concerned to rename/reconstruct 'validity'. Following Mishler (1990), "I propose to redefine validation as the process(es) through which we make claims for and evaluate the 'trustworthiness' of reported observations, interpretations, and generalisations" (p.419). Trustworthiness is a word first used by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to rename/reconceptualise validity. They originally created it in response to the need for developing criteria for assessing qualitative research that are fitting to the theoretical foundations of interpretivism and not empiricism. Although they originally defined the assessment criteria of trustworthiness to parallel the validity constructs of empiricism (viz., internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity), they also defined it in terms of:

* utility - that a trustworthy account is one "worth paying attention to, worth taking account of" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.290).
* moral standing - where a trustworthy account is one that demonstrates "the quality of goodness" (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, p.233) represented in a qualitative study.

It is these characteristics - goodness and utility - that incline me to employ the word 'trustworthiness' to represent the adequacy of the conduct and reporting of qualitative inquiry. You will notice the complementarity here between these characteristics and those discussed earlier in this paper.

So, trustworthiness is the name. However, the criteria for assessing trustworthiness that I am about to propose are not the same as those of Lincoln and Guba. This is because I have based these criteria on the moral and instrumental demands of critical pragmatism. So, rather than the Lincoln and Guba criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, the pragmatic alternatives are reflexivity, transparency, moral reasoning and persuasiveness.

Now I am not making the case, here, that these alternative criteria are meant to replace those of Lincoln and Guba (or, for that matter, the numerous standards of 'validity' assessment arising from a range of qualitative researchers as illustrated by Eisenhart and Howe, 1992). The proposal for reflexivity, transparency, moral reasoning and persuasiveness, is simply a response to my consideration of the perspectival nature of knowledge and the demise of the binary opposites objectivity/subjectivity and realism/idealism. It would require a much more ambitious paper than this to make comparisons between this range of proposals for validity assessment criteria let alone to contemplate some sort of distillation of these into some new universal set. Whether this is desirable or even possible given the differences in research design and purposes in qualitative inquiry, it is not the intention of this paper. What is important is identifying and delineating those trustworthiness criteria that will assure that the form and detail of qualitative research accounts will not be dismissed as 'merely subjective'.

2) Criteria: reflexivity and transparency

In discussing the implications of the perspectival nature of knowledge, the authorial power of the researcher and the specificity of context in ethnographic research, Altheide and Johnson (1994) argue for regulative discipline in the conduct and reporting of an ethnography by conforming to what they call an ethnographic ethic:

"The ethnographic ethic calls for ethnographers to substantiate their interpretations and findings with a reflexive account of themselves and the processes of their research" (p.489).

"A key part of the ethnographic ethic is how we account for ourselves. Good ethnographies show the hand of the ethnographer" (p.493).
What is at issue here, according to Altheide and Johnson "is not so much the objective truth of what is being stated as it is the process or way of knowing. We should continue to be concerned with producing texts that explicate how we claim to know what we know" (p.496, emphasis in original).

There are two aspects of this research ethic that are central to an account being assessed as significant to meeting its pragmatic goal. The first is transparency - being quite explicit in delineating how particular understandings were derived, especially in recognition of the problems encountered in field work. In the words of Smith (1992):

"The write-up of ... projects should include not only one’s interpretation but also a discussion of how and why that interpretation was arrived at" (Smith, 1992, p.104).

Transparency carries implications for the structure of an account, the links between analytic coding categories and specific words and phrases (Mishler, 1990, p.434), and the writing style employed. Researcher clarity about the intended audience of the research account will be one variable influencing the researcher's decision about how to be explicit.

Related to the demand for transparency is the second aspect of the research ethic, that of being reflexive. There are different ways in which researcher reflexivity is conceptualised (some of these are illustrated in the edited collection of Shacklock and Smyth, 1998). The literature addressing more the connections between reflexivity and validation, however, provides much common ground to work from. For example, Altheide and Johnson (1994) argue for a form of validation they call reflexive accounting which culminates in reflexive accounts. Characteristic of these accounts is how they result from "the interactions among context, researcher, methods, setting and actors" (p.489). And these are interactions that occur in both the field work and the desk work components of a project. "It is within and through reflexivity that ... the values which infuse the research process are made explicit and accountable to the readership" (Troyna, 1995, p.404). Altheide and Johnson (1994) identify five dimensions of qualitative research where the demand for reflexivity is necessary:

1. "the relationship between what is observed (behaviours, rituals, meanings) and the larger cultural, historical, and organisational contexts within which the observations are made (the substance);"

2. the relationships among the observer, the observed, and the setting (the observer);

3. the issue of perspective (or point of view), whether the observer's or the members', used to render an interpretation of the ethnographic data (the interpretation);

4. the role of the reader in the final product (the audience);
the issue of representational, rhetorical, or authorial style used by the author(s) to render the description and/or interpretation (the style)" (p.489).

As they go on to explain:

"Each of these areas includes questions or issues that must be addressed and pragmatically resolved by any particular observer in the course of his or her research. The ethnographic ethic calls for ethnographers to substantiate their interpretations and findings with a reflexive account of themselves and the processes of their research" (ibid., p.489).

Complementing these ideas are those argued by Maxwell (1992). In proposing five kinds of understandings that qualitative research accounts can embody (viz., descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, generalisable, and evaluative), Maxwell constructs a framework for reflexively addressing 'threats' to what he terms the 'validity' of these understandings. The appendix to this paper is my translation and elaboration of Maxwell's framework. Its value is in how it can be read as the operationalisation of reflexivity as it applies to the conduct and the write-up of qualitative research projects. In particular, and in association with the demand for transparency, the processes and techniques listed in this table are clear indicators of the distinction between the criteria of trustworthiness and the means or evidence by which assessments may be made about whether or not they are met (Hammersley, 1992b, p.67).

Finally, it is the intimate links between researcher biography and the context and culture s/he is researching, where reflexive accounting is recommended. The possible focus of a self-reflexive researcher role is captured in the following selection of items from Norris (1997):

* the value preferences and commitments of researchers and their knowledge or otherwise of these;
* the affinity of researchers with certain kinds of people, designs, data, theories, concepts, explanations;
* the ability of researchers, including their knowledge, skills, methodological strengths, capacity for imagination;
* the personal qualities of researchers, including, for example, their capacity for concentration and patience; tolerance of boredom and ambiguity; their need for resolution, conclusion and certainty" (p.174).

3) Criteria: moral reasoning and persuasiveness

It has been argued earlier, and so will only be briefly restated here, that with the inevitability of values influencing all layers of research (Popkewitz, 1990, p.62), rather than a realist pursuit of 'objective truth', the preferred pragmatic alternative is in constructing an account not just with practical utility, but with moral advantage. As poignantly put by Carspecken, (1996):
"Remember that, morally, social research will either hurt or help people: it rarely has purely neutral effects with respect to human welfare" (p.207).

Now a recognition of the interconnections between power, values, knowledge and the effects of research is not new. It has been the raison d'etre of those with a criticalist orientation to research for decades now (see, for example, Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Harvey, 1990; Humphries and Truman, 1994; and Noffke and Stevenson, 1995). The moral imperative of the criticalist orientation to research is summed up in this reflection by Goodman (1998) about his critical ethnography of schooling:

"The goal of my study was not to simply report 'what's out there', but was to analyse this reality in ways that work against those social, economic, and psychological constraints and ideologies that keep us from creating a more just and humane reality" (p.55).

This is not to say that criticalists have a mortgage on moral reasoning in research. It is merely to illustrate that there are researchers who do struggle, consciously and reflexively, to shape their methodologies in the name of a more just and equitable existence. Following Goodman (1998), then, out of the window must go the 'truth making' function of research, and in its place a more efficacious pedagogical function.

In pursuit of a pedagogical goal which attempts to make explicit the moral standing of the reported research understandings, the qualitative researcher embraces the utilitarian ethos of critical pragmatism by constructing accounts which "are more or less useful or, in varying degrees and ways, persuasive" (Barone, 1992, p.26). (There are parallels here with the 'catalytic validity' of Lather, 1986, and the 'catalytic authenticity' of Lincoln, 1995). And how do we decide whether an account is persuasive or not? Well, according to Mishler (1990):

"The essential criterion ... is the degree to which we can rely on the concepts, methods and inferences of a study, or tradition in inquiry, as the basis for our own theorising and empirical research. If our overall assessment of a study's trustworthiness is high enough for us to act on it, we are granting the findings a sufficient degree of validity to invest our own time and energy, and to put at risk our reputations as competent investigators" (p.419, emphases added).

The means to such an outcome - to be so persuaded as to 'act on it', or to rely upon it for your own work (ibid., p.429) - relates to such qualities as the force of the moral reasoning in the account, the quality of researcher reflexivity, and the level of transparency in the connections made between evidence and interpretation. The four criteria introduced here are very much interdependent. In addition, particular rhetorical devices are integral, too, as illustrated by Schwandt (1993):

"We seek to persuade one another of the value or goodness of a way of thinking. Alexander (1987) emphasises that the persuasiveness of discourses 'is based on such qualities as logical coherence, expansiveness of scope, interpretive insight, value relevance, rhetorical force, beauty, and texture of argument' " (p.20).

These qualities - interpretive insight, value relevance, rhetorical force, beauty - are characteristic of novels, or works of fiction. The inevitable impact of our subjectivities, of our partiality, in the conduct and interpretations that make up our research, is that we write fictions (Barone, 1990; Winter, 1986). But, as Eisner (1991) has argued consistently over the years, "A piece of fiction can be true and still be fiction. Fiction, in a metaphorical sense of truth, is 'true to life' ..." (p.108). It is what Bruner (1986) calls 'lifelikeness' or 'verisimilitude' (p.11). A lovely illustration of this is provided by Barone (1992) when discussing the narrative genre in qualitative inquiry:
"The persuasiveness of Dickens's text is not the kind fuelled by a rhetoric of 'objective' scientific findings or by appeals to comfortable consensus, to moral absolutes, or to dispassionate logic. His text is critically useful because it successfully appeals (1) to experience, and (2) to a desire to lessen the humiliation of other human beings. Dickens's achievement was to enable his readers vicariously to experience life as Yorkshire schoolchildren, so that they might attain a sense of solidarity with those schoolchildren, seeing them no longer as strangers but as 'fellow sufferers' (Rorty, 1989).

This is not, therefore, a kind of textual usefulness that hides behind a pretence of moral or political neutrality. Indeed, Rorty (1989) would characterise Dickens's works ... as books that 'help us to see how social practices which we have taken for granted have made us cruel (p.141)' " (p.34).

It would be a mistake to take this drift into the narrative genre of qualitative inquiry (or what Barone and Eisner (1997) call arts-based methodology) as an attempt to make the case that such a genre will best meet the demands of persuasiveness. This is not my intention. It is simply an illustration of one orientation to qualitative inquiry that vividly strives for persuasiveness through verisimilitude.

In the more conventional qualitative report it is where and how the author establishes the locus of her/his argument that is central to persuasiveness (Potter, 1996). It could be in how the interpreted understandings are introduced, the level and quality of evidence cited to support them, and the rhetorical devices employed such as "ways of personal expression, choice of metaphor, figurative allusions, semantics, decorative phrasing or plain speaking, textual organisation, and so on ..." (Van Maanen, 1988, p.5).

It is in the writing of research accounts that the links between these four criteria become obvious. Writing in the context of research is a reflexive activity. It is through writing we learn about ourselves as well as the phenomena we research. Transparency in writing can be a persuasive attribute for the pedagogical and moral value in a way of thinking about some phenomenon. This applies as much to the researcher as it does the research audience.

And now to dialogue: refining self-reflexivity

"When subjectivity is seen as distortion and bias, the literature offers more or less prescriptive advice; when seen as an interactional quality, we learn about personal, reflexive, or political and theoretical stances" (Jansen and Peshkin, 1992, p.682).

My consideration of the selected literature on qualitative research has begun to establish a theoretical base for linking a self-reflexive researcher role with the demands for trustworthiness - where I am charged to explicate how I construct my interpretations, giving reasons for the moral standing of my work, and being quite transparent and persuasive in the way I report the account. I am much better prepared now to engage in a dialogue about what Jansen and Peshkin (above) call these 'interactional qualities'. I can envisage that dialogue with colleagues, with the literature, and especially with myself as a qualitative researcher, and in and through that research, endeavour to refine my understandings and practices about what it can mean to create trustworthy research accounts. Would this be sufficient for research clients and research participants? I can envisage a dialogue here too. This will be the acid test of the coherence and efficacy of my assumptions and practices.

Appendix

A translation of Maxwell's (1992) threats to validity typology
(a framework for reflexively responding to threats to validity in qualitative research when attempting to construct five different forms of understanding)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat to Validity</th>
<th>Type of Understanding</th>
<th>Validation Techniques to Reduce Threat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field Work</td>
<td>Desk Work</td>
<td>Descriptive validity - challenges to the factual accuracy of the account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>distortions of what was seen and heard (objects, events, behaviours): mis-hearing, mis-transcribing, mis-remembering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>omissions of, for example, the tone, from informants' interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>recognition of frequency of events, people, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>variations in data from different methods (or observers) used in the same situation. Verified accuracy of the description of events, objects, behaviours (not meanings). * Member checks (or inter-subjective agreements) to clarify disagreements and identify multiple perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Detailed recording.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Data saturation - collecting sufficient and appropriate evidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Purposive sampling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Recording quantities as well as qualities. * Thick description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Utilising informants' language. Interpretive validity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Misrepresentation of descriptions of participants' perspectives; ie, their intentions, cognition, affect, beliefs, evaluations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants not recognising the accounts.

Dismissing participants' perspectives on the basis that they are really unaware of their feelings or views, may recall these inaccurately, or may un/consciously distort or conceal views. Verification of the meanings of objects, events and behaviours as held by the participants; ie, emic perspectives * Prolonged time in the field (immersion).

Multiple data collection: repeated 'measures', triangulation, accessing all stakeholders.

Member checks of researcher's use of interpretive concepts.

Reviewing researcher affinity with particular people and interpretations.

* Constructed accounts grounded in participants' own language and concepts.

Researcher makes overt connections between his construction of participants' interpretations. Theoretical validity

Questioning "the legitimacy of the application of a given concept or theory [brought by the researcher] to established facts" (p.292).

Challenges to the meaning of events.

Questioning "an account's validity as a theory of some phenomenon" (p.291). A more abstract account of events. "[It] refers to an account's function as an explanation as well as a description or interpretation of the phenomena" (p.291). * Weighing evidence to assess confidence in the explanatory power of selected concepts.

Consciously checking or mapping the consistency of the interrelations between concepts that have been inductively constructed.
Seeking countering evidence as well as constructs.

Memoing or field notes - continually maintained and progressively focused and refined. * Researcher to be explicit about the meaning and efficacy of the theoretical constructs the researcher brings to the account.

Is the evidence and argument compelling? Generalisability

Specificity of case.

Specificity of population (ie., questionable representation).

Purposive sampling and progressive focusing; meaning non-random and unrepresentative.

Concentration on internal validity.

Lack of clarity of the strengths and purposes of qualitative inquiry and the persuasiveness of rich accounts and unique groups or situations.

Omission - eg., in brief interviews you get only part of the story, and researchers' extrapolations therefore can lead to flawed inferences.

Establishing the broader application of the account.

More commonly, qualitative inquiry is contained to internal generalisation because 1) "They are interesting because they [are] special" (p.294), and 2) the unique emphasis of qualitative inquiry is understanding more than generalisation. * Concentrate efforts to descriptively detail the context, especially in terms of commonalities with (or being representative of) other settings.

Review against the purpose of the research and the role of purposive sampling.
Pursue data redundancy.

Consider alternative interpretations; ie., attempt to falsify accounts. * Define boundaries explicitly (eg., this is institutionally generalisable only).

Incorporate rich accounts of the characteristics of the settings.

Present your theorising in such a way that it demonstrably makes sense in relation to particular characteristics of settings which may be evident in other settings. Evaluative validity

Conceptual overdeterminism

Overgeneralising via cliched concepts like class and 'race'.

Asserting judgements without constructive humility.

Adopting the role of critic over the role of researcher.

"Going native" - privileging comfortable ways of viewing phenomena. Judgement of the value or interest served by the idea, program, event, studied.

Reconstructed account situating the researched in the wider socio-cultural arena. * Prolonged engagement in the field.

Triangulating both sources of data and alternative theoretical frames.

Seeking theoretical saturation.
Systematically accounting for the mediation of understandings via language, culture, context and history.

Member checks on reconstructive analyses. * Reflexing on authorial power.

Consciously accounting for subjectivities.

Transparency in making links between judgements of value and power.

Care not to blame the victim.
References


Lather, P. (1986), "Issues of validity in openly ideological research: between a rock and a soft place". Interchange, 17(4), 63-84.


