TECHNICAL NOTES

Ways of Discussing Validity
in Qualitative Nursing Research

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The discussion of qualitative methods in the nursing literature has shifted in tone and substance over the past years. Arguments for use of these methods for discovering knowledge in nursing, particularly presented in contrast or opposition to quantitative methods, appear with less regularity (Williams, 1990). At the same time, actual reports of qualitative research appear more often in our major research journals. In other words, it appears that the dominant mode of discourse for practitioners of qualitative methods within the discipline is moving away from one of justification. Justification is a mode of discourse inextricably linked to marginality and thus dependent on its opposition to define its reason for and state of existence. As the discourse matures, not only should it become more substantive (Williams, 1990) but also more reflective on its own foundational and methodological issues.

A primary issue is that of validity in qualitative research. I use validity here in the broad meaning of the word as it applies to interpretation and presentation of textual data. Validity in this sense is accomplished, to paraphrase Geertz (1988, p. 9), when the researcher is able to come closer to seeing things as they are than as she or he would have them. (Geertz actually spoke more of subjectivity, but I wish to avoid the epistemological battles that term implies in this brief note.)

Within the qualitative discourse in nursing it is difficult to address this issue in a technical way. The necessary terminology remains idiosyncratic and conceptually undeveloped, varying by author and study (Brink, 1989). Some authors speak of error and accuracy, others of reliability, bias control, bias reduction, or rigor in describing their methodological aims and techniques (Benner, 1985; Brink, 1989; Kahn & Steeves, 1988; Sandelowski, 1986).

This is not *merely* a matter of semantics, although it is that sort of matter, for semantics, the use and meaning of language, is the basis of technique in qualitative methods. Data, interpretation of data, and the presentation of these interpretations inevitably take linguistic (as opposed to statistic) form and are not reducible beyond

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words. Technical development of method must take into account the ambiguity and complexity inherent in language, including the assumptions and metaphors, often unvoiced, that underlie ways of discussing subjects like validity.

Presently, two ways of discussing validity in the qualitative nursing literature are common. Neither exists as a mutually exclusive discourse, although both are grounded in entirely different assumptions. Both ways (of saying or writing) support the construction of different kinds of arguments for the validity of particular studies.

One way in which this is accomplished is through analogous language—discussing validity in the same terms used by quantitative researchers—that implies that the issue is comparable in context. As ironic as this appears, because the point of the research and its strength is its difference, qualitative authors do not seem to be particularly self-conscious about it. This way of saying arose from the original marginality of the method within the larger discipline and continues to exist for pragmatic reasons. As Brink (1989) said, "Most of us have to write for quantitative people" (p. 149).

Analogy plays out in this approach through the construction of various procedures, the use of which underlie any arguments made for validity. These procedures are used at various points during and after the researcher's own analysis and often involve other people as "judges" of the accuracy of decisions made during analysis. A typical example: Several judges, presumably experts in the method or content, are given codes, or the categoric labels that data have been assigned to, along with the rules for such assignments and verbatim bits of data. The judges are asked to match data bits with codes and the results are then compared to the researcher's own interpretation. Percentage agreement can be calculated and compared with a criterion value selected as an indicator of validity (e.g., Kahn & Steeves, 1988), and thus the validity argument is made in a familiar (statistical) form. The problem here is that the usefulness of such procedures depends on the larger analogy, which remains unexamined. In the example above, for instance, the verbatim data bits are viewed as analogous to scores on a psychometric instrument and the judges to equations that create correlation coefficients and significance tests. The analogy obscures the human problem of interpretation on which the procedure depends—judges are not mathematically consistent and codes and categorical definitions are written with more or less clarity. Again, it all depends on language. Although undeniably pragmatic, this kind of analogy can lead to procedural charade.

The second way of discussing the validity issue is with a metaphor, the use of self as instrument or research tool (Lipson, 1989). Whereas the previous way of speaking about validity acknowledges and, as Brink (1989) made explicit, is oriented to "outsiders," or quantitative researchers, this metaphor belongs to the insiders' domain. It comes with the territory, so to speak, when a researcher's first attempt at qualitative inquiry reveals how hazy the boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity are in this method. In the course of the metaphor the lack of "objective" measurement devices becomes the notion that one's own self is the instrument of data collection.

What kind of instrument is never specified, but it is admittedly an obscure one. In anthropology, which has lived with the metaphor for quite a long time, there is now,

in Geertz's (1988) phrase, "a pervasive nervousness about the whole business" (p. 131). It is one thing to use one's self and quite another to explain to others exactly how to go about doing that.

Lipson (1989) is the rare nursing author who has attempted to tackle that problem. Although she made several practical suggestions on how to improve the use of self while conducting qualitative research, Lipson's basic strategy in terms of arguing for validity is typical: Enhancing the use of self in qualitative research depends on developing reflexivity, an awareness or consciousness on the part of the researcher of her own role in the whole process. Lipson appears to mean, as do other proponents of reflexivity (Aamodt, 1983; Lamb & Huttlinger, 1989) a sort of critical reflection about the process the researcher engages in that somehow (again, obscure exactly how) enhances validity. The problem here is not just the tautology but also a misunderstanding of language itself. As G. Watson (1987) pointed out, "Reflexivity is not merely something one 'does,' like engaging in self-reflection or seeking validity" (p. 29), but an inherent property of language itself. By itself, reflexivity offers no solution to the problem of validity as posed, or at least no adequate way of discussing it.

Looking at what some authors say about reflexivity, however, provides a clue to a way out of this dilemma. That way out involves developing and refining another way of discussing the matter. For instance, Lamb and Huttlinger (1989) suggested that "reflexivity considers the reciprocal influence of the researcher and that which is researched" (p. 765). Obviously, reflexivity does not actually consider anything, being a property and not a person, but what is implied is the need for the researcher to account for a relationship, actually several relationships, that are at the heart of the qualitative process. A new way of discussing validity then might be grounded productively in a language of relationship. Relationships are not only less obscure than selves, but that kind of subject resonates nicely with the unfolding discourse on the caring relationship as a moral foundation of nursing (Benner & Wrubel, 1988; Cooper, 1988; Rawnsley, 1990; J. Watson, 1985).

This alternate way of discussing validity would be constructed around three key relationships in qualitative research: the relationship of investigator with informants, data, and reader. In opening these subjects up for examination through discourse, over time the relevant elements of each should become apparent, but special attention should be paid to what is not talked about now. For example, discussion of the relationship with informants would start with and encompass what authors like Aamodt (1983) and Lipson (1989) called the influence of the researcher on the process, yet proceed quickly to the dialect of the social interactions themselves. How did elements of mutual trust or mistrust, social attractiveness, or gender differences enter into the situation? What interpretation were informants making of the researcher? As Dumont (1978) said, "I act and react, toward and to something. This something happens to be a someone who is acting toward and reacting to me" (p. 2).

Discussion of the relationship with data should be moved away from its present linear form (collection to coding to analysis) with recognition of the actual circularity of the process. How and when did different aspects of the interpretation presented to the reader emerge, and in how many prior and various forms? How open was the

investigator to inducing breakdowns in her understanding of the data (Agar, 1985), and how was her confidence in her interpretations challenged and tested over the course of a study?

Finally, the relationship of the investigator with her readers can no longer be ignored as transparent. Ending the present pose of "the research ends before the writing begins" should help begin discussion of the different ways in which qualitative researchers develop and communicate their authorial presence in the texts they write, texts that are written, as Geertz (1988) pointed out, to persuade, not simply to present. This brings the validity issue back to the linguistic text itself, where it belongs, so that, as Benner (1985) suggested, readers themselves are able to judge the validity of the researcher's work.

This is not expecting too much of readers. For example, consider the following remarks about an ethnographic study of a therapeutic community for the treatment of drug abuse and alcoholism:

> Written with full awareness of the ethnographer's role as participant and author, [the author's] feelings, confusions, and conflicts are part of the data. The book also gives a scrupulous account of how the data came to be. We know how many instances of various types of events [she] encountered, how she kept her notes, how she was defined by different people . . . at different times, the characteristics of her informants and the people she observed, and the written documents . . . that were available to her. (Rosenblatt, 1990, p. 409)

What is expecting too much of readers is that they tolerate for very long language that mystifies or obscures explanations of our method. Qualitative researchers in nursing must being attending to language in building a methodologically reflective discourse. It is the basis of our technique.

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