

# Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Research

by Donald Ratcliff

[See Ratcliff, 1995, pp. 20-31 for an extensive discussion of qualitative validity and reliability]

## Can find validity in qualitative research by:

- Divergence from initial expectations--see personal notes kept from the beginning to see how the data has pushed you from initial assumptions
- Convergence with other sources of data--using variation kinds of triangulation and comparisons with the literature
- Extensive quotations--from field notes, transcripts of interviews, other notes
- Other research data--such as archival data, recordings (video or audio)
- Independent checks/multiple researchers--more than one person involved in the research of those studied; team research approach or other sources of verification.
- Member check--where you go back to those researched, at the completion of the study, and ask them if you are accurate or need correction/elaboration on constructs, hypotheses, etc. Some take this to the point of the researcher and those researched working together in the planning, conducting, and analysis of results.

## Can find reliability in qualitative research by:

- Multiple viewings of videotape--by same person or different people
- Multiple listenings of audio tape--by same person or different people
- Multiple transcriptions of audio tape--by same person or different people

*These would probably come out quite high in most cases, but at least they would be an attempt.*

It is important to note that high reliability may suggest a systematic bias at work in data, a bias shared by multiple researchers or across observations by the same researcher. This is why many qualitative researchers emphasize validity rather than reliability; documenting what occurs in an accurate manner may reveal inconsistencies. As qualitative researchers are fond of saying, "You never cross the same river twice" (because it's never the exact same water, the banks of the river are never exactly the same because of erosion, etc.). Reality is dynamic; it changes constantly. Of course, this overlooks important continuities of the real world when taken to extremes, most of us recognize. But it is important to realize that low reliability *could* be consistent with high validity if the social

situation is constantly in flux, or people might see things differently because they are seeing different aspects, different levels, different perspectives, of the whole which is far more complex than any single perspective/person might see. Putting two different accounts together might result in a better understanding of the whole than either one separately, even though the consistency between those accounts might be rather low. Together, the two very different accounts--reflecting low reliability--could produce even higher validity. It's something to consider.

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