Module Three: Quality

Reema A. Alsweel

George Mason University
**Introduction**

Standing at the end of the road of this summer class, I look back at what I have treaded, and I am proud of the strong foundations I have built for myself. Having established my conceptual framework and having a better understanding of my methodology, I now need to go through it all with my stance on quality to make it even stronger. However, quality carries such strong connotations that I devout this paper to my own understanding of ‘quality’ in order to defend my work.

Being a researcher at the very beginning of my research journey, I struggle with what characterizes quality. Adding to this dilemma is the lack of the word ‘quality’ in the literature review I have conducted for this study. What defines quality in work? How do I know that I have achieved quality in my own work? Instead I find that validity is discussed over and over in many of the articles, however, it is not just validity that I am after, it is the quality of my whole research from beginning to end that I seek.

I had to come to terms with my own understanding of validity and quality to take a strong stance. This paper aims at searching deep within my own epistemology and coming to an understanding of quality, the characteristics of quality and the role of ethics in all of this. And thus, this paper is divided into these three sections so as to give each its space (within the limitations of this paper).

**Validity and Quality**

From the very beginning of this module, I found that I gravitated more towards quality and not validity. I struggled with trying to understand why I had such a stance, and it was clear from our discussion in class that this was not going to be an easy task. Although in many of the
readings I have done, the word validity is used, I cannot bring myself to see that as what I strive for in my personal journey. It is scary for me as a novice research to make such a claim (who am I in the field of research), but in the same breath this is my study, and thus, I must explored my understandings and reasoning. I believe that this will not only build my definition of quality, but will also build my argument for quality.

Validity has a very quantitative feel to me. First because it feels like it is achieved by comparing things, as if it needs a checklist of ‘if you have this then you achieve it’. Also I feel that validity is something one ‘achieves’ at the end. However, I do not dismiss all use of validity. I found that I ‘fit’ into many definitions of validity and thus choose to combine some of its aspects with my own to define my understanding of quality. Validity is described by many as a process and not a product (Maxwell, 2005, Cho & Trent, 2006), it is something present from the very beginning and continues throughout ones work;

Strategies for ensuring rigor must be built into the qualitative research process... these strategies include investigator responsiveness, methodological coherence, theoretical sampling and sampling adequacy, an active analytic stance, and saturation. These strategies, when used appropriately, force the researcher to correct both the direction of the analysis and the development of the study as necessary, thus ensuring reliability and validity of the completed project (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002, p. 9).

I see quality as something that encompasses validity but also the essence of research; it emerges out of the research because it is in all aspects of it. “By focusing on strategies to establish trustworthiness at the end of the study, rather than focusing on process of verification
during the study, the investigator runs the risk of missing serious threats to the reliability and validity until it is too late to correct them” (Morse et al, 2002, p. 4).

Part of the process of validity comes from one’s lens, and Creswell and Miller (2000) describe validity as governed by the lens researchers choose to validate their studies and researchers’ paradigm assumptions (my paradigm assumptions were discussed in earlier modules). Thus, they introduce three lenses in any research; that of the researcher, the participants, and the reader. Although they include some discussions of methods, they do not discuss it directly. To this I would like to add methodological choices as a different lens and this moves it form validity to quality for me. It is in the essence of the research, in every aspect of it that makes it quality and goes beyond validity.

As I search for my understanding of the characteristics of quality, I find that the deregulatory approach (Reybold & Maxwell, 2007) seems to fit my needs. My focus is the human, both myself and my participants, and our voices. This is reflected in how I view quality in my list below, it’s all human, “qualitative researchers use a lens not based on scores, instruments, or research designs but a lens established using the views of people who conduct, participate, or read and review a study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125).

**Quality in Qualitative Research**

It is not easy to deconstruct quality into a checklist of sort; all aspects are intermingled and influence/affect one another (again this is part of qualitative research which is a human, social science). For the purpose of this paper I will try to create a sort of checklist, although many aspects run together.
The Researcher

The researcher is an integral part of any study, the main instrument, and thus must be addressed in any discussion on quality. I see quality in the researcher through being reflexive, celebrating becoming a native in a study, and working out a clear understanding of all terminology used.

**Reflexivity.** As I have mentioned above, the researcher is the main instrument of any study. Thus, my identity and beliefs play a vital role in my study, from my research interest to my methods; all are based on my ontology and epistemology and all have an influence on research. Part of quality, I believe is to be open and accepting of this fact, to understand that the study itself is very subjective and that any search for objectivity can in fact interfere with quality. As Maxwell (2005) explains “understanding how a particular researcher’s values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusions of the study… explaining your possible biases and how you will deal with these is a key task of your research proposal” (p. 108), thus from the very being, the proposal, the researcher should be made clear and present.

In any study, it is important than, for the sake of quality, for the researcher to make him/herself very present by “discussing one’s predispositions, making biases explicit, to the extent possible” (Patton, 2002, p. 553). I must use ‘self-discloser’, where I express my beliefs, myself, throughout the paper to allow the reader to ‘see’ my perspective and understand my stance. As Creswell and Miller (2000) confer, “it is particularly important for researchers to acknowledge and describe their entering beliefs and biases early in the research process to allow readers to understand their positions, and then to bracket or suspend those research biases as the study proceeds” (p. 127).
Being reflexive also allows me to understand my influence on the study, on my participants and on my findings. For quality purposes, it is important to “understand how you are influencing what the informant says, and how this affects the validity of the inferences you can draw from the interview” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 109), and this will be discussed in more detail below.

**Being native.** Thus far, being native, seemed like a four letter word, it was something to be avoided as it ‘blurred the truth’. However, the readings for this class allowed me to sigh with relief as I was native and could not get out it. Part of reflexivity for quality is to know that “eliminating the actual influence of the researcher is impossible, and the goal in a qualitative study is not to eliminate this influence, but to understand it and to use it productively” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 109).

Fine (1994) discusses working the hyphen between the self and other; she explains how a researcher must come to terms with the multiple relationships that exist between the self and the other. Although I agree with Fine on that there are multiple relationships that exist between those involved (researcher and participant, friends…) I find that the whole idea of a hyphen gets in the way, and the self-other dichotomy can be overcome by becoming ‘native’. Actually, the labeling of ‘self’ and ‘other’ can constrain relationships, even if just for the researcher who might start to draw that hyphen for him/herself.

Thus I found great comfort in Heshusius’ (1994) article on participatory mode of consciousness, which she explains as an “awareness of a deeper level of kinship between the knower and the known. An inner desire to let go of the perceived boundaries that constitute “self”- and that construct the perception of distance between self and other” (p. 16). Therefore, as
a researcher, I should not put up those boundaries, but instead try to break them down through my study. I must understand that I am not looking for truth (what is real truth anyway?) but for stories and voices that need to be heard including my own; “reality is no longer understood as truth to be interpreted but as mutually evolving” (p. 18).

**Terminology.** At the beginning of this class, I was very hung up on terminology. It was with good intentions too as I had to find my fit, to defined my stand and to enhance quality. Having clear working definitions explained and expressed in my study allows both myself and all those involved to understand my perspective, and to take a look through my lens. Thus, through knowing what is out there, finding my fit, and defining it clearly to myself and my reader, my argument is understood and stronger and as a result quality is enhanced.

**The Participants**

Participants make up one of the main pillars of qualitative study; they provide the all elusive ‘truth’ that many researchers seek. In fact, it is the participants that guide an emergent study, taking it in many different and new directions. Accordingly, quality is enhanced when participants and their roles are understood. For this section, I focus on the use of member checking as a fundamental part of quality.

Systematically taking the data back to its source, to shed light on my own interpretations and biases, to truly understand and include all voices in the research is what member checking means to me. It is a simple yet important way of enhancing quality by ruling out misinterpretations (notice that the word interpretation is still used as research is very subjective). “With the lens focused on participants, the researchers systematically check the data and the
narrative account… the participants add credibility to the qualitative study by having a chance to react to both the data and the final narrative” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127).

I see the purpose of research not to find truth, but to look through a window of personal reality; it is to tell a story. By involving participants from the very beginning in interpretations they become “engaged in making sure their realities correspond with the interpretations brought forth by the researchers” (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 322), and their voices are heard. There becomes a kind of empathic connection “which can help participants feel heard, known, and understood” (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 737).

However, this is done systematically; as I have mentioned earlier, quality is a process and not something to be achieved at the end. Therefore, after every transcription, the participants need to be involved in making sure their voices where heard whether it be through reinterpretation or follow up questions. This emphasizes that there is no self and other, there is a strong mutual bond that works together towards a voice.

The Audience

The audience makes up yet another important pillar in enhancing quality, “issues of quality and credibility intersect with audience” (Patton, 2002, p. 542). It is important for me as a researcher to know who my audiences are, what they are looking for, and what they expect from research so I know how to defend, explain and argue my stance as needed.

One way of addressing my audiences’ expectations is the use of persuasive arguments, to “lead readers through a progression of evidence and explanations of why other interpretations are not as adequate as the present interpretative claims” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 477). Thus I have a conversation with my audience as to why or why not I did what I did. I must try to answer their
questions before they ask them by explaining myself, and this means that I have to have a clear understanding of my audience and their needs from research.

To achieve the above, an important step is to use peer review, which “provides support, plays devil’s advocate, challenges the researchers’ assumptions, pushes the researchers to the next step methodologically, and asks hard questions about methods and interpretations” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). This is also something that needs to be done systematically; whether it be a professor or a classmate, having someone read your work through its different stages can give you a different perspective (maybe even take off that horse blinder I sometimes unintentionally put on as a PhD student).

The Methods

This element of quality, I believe, brings all the human aspects together; it involves the researcher, the participants and the audience. I divide this section into first, thick descriptions which is for both the audience’s and the researcher’s sake. Second I discuss friendship method, which is for the participant and the researcher relationship. And finally, emergent design which involves all three lenses on a journey of discovery. I also conclude this section by discussing other aspects of methods I use but that are less focused on, but still important, due to the limitations of this paper.

Thick descriptions. Using thick descriptions in my research to express ideas, write my observations and share my thoughts provides what Maxwell (2005) calls ‘rich data’. Discussing all aspects of your research with your audience and the implications that may have on your study can enhance quality as it “creates verisimilitude, statements that produce for the readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in a study”
(Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). Thick descriptions can satisfy those who search for ‘truth’ by presenting a section of reality.

**Friendship as a method.** As a native and one who is welcoming of the multiple bounders between all involved, I find that building friendship is a method that enhances quality. Building friendships can create trust, comfort, understanding, compassion and lead to ‘honest’ voices, “through authentic engagement, the lines between researcher and researched blur, permitting each to explore the complex humanity of both self and other. Instead of “speaking for” or even “giving voice,” researches get to know others in meaningful and sustained ways” (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 733).

**Emergent design.** Listening to the data and allowing the participants to tell their story may seem scary to a novice researcher, but I believe it enhances quality as it allows it to be natural and ‘honest’. Part of being emergent, means that there is a need on the part of the researcher to be flexible and reflexive (again an aspect of quality), going back and forth between all the different aspects of research and working with the data instead of having it work for you, is part of qualitative research which is human in nature, “qualitative research is iterative rather than linear, so that a good qualitative researcher moves back and forth between design and implication to ensure congruence among question formulation, literature, recruitment, data collection strategies, and analysis” (Morse et al, 2002, p. 10).

**Other aspects.** I believe that immediate transcription of the data to get to know it and become closer to it is also important and it goes back to many different points mentioned here all of which enhance quality. Participant selection, the interview questions, settings, all these different choices made by the researcher are also used to enhance quality and thus must be
discussed clearly. I have run out of space for this paper but it is clear that quality is in every aspect of research and this paper alone cannot do it justice. It is an intermingled web and I hope that I have made my thoughts somewhat clear.

**Ethics**

Talking about quality alone does not sit well with me. I see that ethics and quality are also intermingled; it is a tangled web we knit here in qualitative research. Again, I find that I first look outwards to find my ‘fit’, I need to understand where I belong in this word before I can make any claims and that to me is both ethical and enhances quality because others can now judge it as so.

Searching for the meaning of ethics I found comfort in Ellis’s (2007) dimensions of ethics. First there is the procedural ethics, which is the legal aspect of it and is done through IRB. Next is the ethics in practice or situational ethics, “the kind that deal with the unpredictable, often subtle, yet ethically important moments that come up in the field” (p. 4). This to me is where it gets muddled and the best thing I can do is to be reflexive and open and listen to the different voices (lenses) of my study. Finally, there is the rational ethics which “recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work…requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others” (p. 4). I am proud to say that all these points are discussed in my characterizations of quality, and thus I can say that to me Ethics=Quality.
Conclusion

“There is no prototype qualitative researchers must follow, no mold we must fit in, to ensure that we are bound for the right track” (Peshkin, 1993, p. 28). I guess each one of us has their own track to tread, and this can seem both scary and invigorating at the same time. I know that my journey has not ended, and that I have many bumps and bruises as a result. But I also know that I have found my voice and this has made me stronger. I will continue on my journey and hopefully grow as a result.

On a final note, one can see that I did not discuss any of the common place terminology associated with the validity and reliability of qualitative research (such as trustworthiness, credibility…etc). As I searched, I have come to realize that there is “a plethora of terms and criteria introduced for minute variations and situations in which rigor could be applied” (Morse et al, 2002, p. 5). It has been my goal since the very first day of advanced qualitative class to find my ‘fit’ and to better understand my terminology. However, with this plethora of terminology, I lost my way. Thus, I have decided that for the final paper on quality, and for the purpose of enhancing quality, it was best to explain my stance on it since I believe that quality integrates all aspects of my research.
References


