



Is it possible for qualitative research to be
properly valid and reliable?

ABSTRACT

With reference to definitions of validity and reliability, and drawing extensively on conceptualizations of qualitative research, this essay examines the correlation between the reliability of effort to find answers to questions about the social world, and the validity of conclusions drawn from such attempts. This is to point out the fundamental position to the role of theory in relation to research; as an inductivist strategy qualitative research tries to confer the correspondence between reality and representation. The problem of validity and reliability in qualitative research is entwined with the definition of qualitative research and the possibility to mirror this in practice to make a qualitative research properly valid and reliable. That presents both challenges and chances to qualitative researchers; yet, with taking into consideration qualitative criteria in social research, achieving validity and as well as reliability in qualitative research is not impossible.

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INTRODUCTION

‘Research’ in the social sciences is a problematic concept; there are diverse interpretations of its meaning and it is defined differently by different observers. In the most basic terms research can be understood, in Kumar’s words, as ‘one of the ways to find answers to your questions’ (Kumar, 2005: 6). Such an abstract definition is all-encompassing that includes various research strategies, designs and methods. Therefore, it does not tell much about the questions and the answers, and the correlation between both in relation to the researched subject matter. The difficulty and disagreement lies in finding answers to questions about a subject matter that is in slow motion and continuous change, to identify and observe a moving target: the social world. Since the late twentieth and the beginning of twenty first century, there has been an on-going debate among social science scholars on how ‘research’ should be conducted (Bulmer, 1979; Kirk and Miller, 1986; Marshall and Rossman, 1989; Lawrence Neuman, 1991, 2003; Silverman, 1993, 2006, Bryman 2008). The debate, currently, is one between two traditions in social research, namely quantitative and qualitative. Each tradition, in turn, has different ontological and epistemological standpoint in relation to the social world. In a metaphorical sense, it is like looking through different lenses, viewing the social world differently; different things seem important and hence seek finding answers to different questions. That is, the quantitative research regards the social world as separate to the observer; such an ontological objectivism subsequently breeds a positivist epistemological alignment to view the social world as a measurable object. The qualitative research, on the contrary, ontologically takes the social world as a construct of the researcher and the researched, and thus, is epistemologically interpretivist.

This essay discusses the qualitative research, and its possibility to be valid and reliable, I regard this as central to the social research debate. The core question is can qualitative research be appropriately valid and reliable? It is worth mentioning that there are more than one answer to this question, this however, in my view is one of

the beauties of social sciences that there can be more than one possible answer to an addressed question; not seeking a yes *or* no but rather a yes *and* no answer. Having said this, this essay is *an* answer to the question, not *the* answer, and it is an interpretation to the debate.

The problem to be addressed is imperative because it aims to examine the correlation between the reliability of effort to find answers to questions about the social world, and the validity of conclusions drawn from such an attempt. In other words, it is pointing out the fundamental position to the role of theory in relation to research, as an inductivist research strategy, to confer the correspondence between reality and representation.

This paper argues that the problem of validity and reliability in qualitative research is entwined with the definition of qualitative research, though some scholars argue that qualitative research is not as valid and reliable as quantitative research, this essay argues that it is possible for qualitative research to be properly valid and reliable, taking into consideration qualitative criteria in social research, including its designs and methods.

In three sections the essay offers an answer the addressed question; in the first section it defines qualitative research and hence deconstructing the question relies on how qualitative research is defined. The second section addresses the matter of validity and the third section takes the issues of reliability in qualitative research. Finally based on what would be discussed through out, the paper offers a conclusion.

I. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

To regard the qualitative research as non-quantitative is understandable, but it is ‘... uninformative: we need more than a negative definition’ (Grahame, 1999: 14). The problem with defining qualitative research, however, is that there is more than one type of qualitative research. For example, Gurbrium and Holsten (1997) identify four traditions in qualitative research: (a) naturalism, tries to understand the social reality per-se; (b) ethnomethodology, studies social interaction to understand the creation of social order; (c) emotionalism, apprehension with subjectivity in relation to humans

and finally; (d) postmodernism, constructing a variety of the social realities through discourse (see, Sliverman 2006; Bryman 2008). If one pays close attention to all those four traditions one can observe some common characteristic; that first, centrality of social reality and humans; second, investigating a changing reality; third, interpreting the researched reality in a constructive manner, that the researched contributes meaning to the research and fourth, attempt to understand and seek meaning. Such common characteristics can introduce an idea about what qualitative research ‘is’.

One interpretation of what qualitative research ‘*is*’ is what quantitative research ‘*is not*’; this is to identify the latter in order to understand the former. In other words, a qualitative strategy can be best understood in relation to a quantitative strategy, by contrasting both. Bryman (2008) has highlighted some common contrasts between quantitative and qualitative researches, as the following table shows:

Quantitative	Qualitative
Number	words,
point of view of the researcher	points of view of participants,
researcher distinct	researcher close,
theory testing	theory emergent,
static	process,
structured	unstructured,
generalizing	context understanding,
hard reliable data	rich in depth,
macro	micro,
behaviour	meaning,
artificial settings	natural setting

Source: Bryman, 2008: 393

As the above table indicates qualitative research concerns words and meaning and takes the view of the participant into consideration; researcher is close to the social reality and the gap between reality and representation is reduced; it attempts to

generate theory with its inductive logic; takes the social reality as a process; it is unstructured and pays a great deal to understanding the context therefore it offers detailed data that is rich in depth; further it is micro and seeks meaning of the researched in their natural setting.

With regards to contrasting quantitative and qualitative researches some other scholars argue that in the debate on the social research and discussing different strategies to the conduct of research we are not in a dilemma of a ‘stark choice between words and numbers, or even between precise and imprecise data; but rather with a range from more to less precise and imprecise data’, (Hammersly, 1992: 163). It is true that both qualitative and quantitative strategies are different but they complement each other in the broader spectrum of social research. Therefore, our focus ought to be on the very researched social context and try to ‘manage the tension between reality and representation’ (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997:114). I believe that managing the tension between reality and representation, is a conclusion that we may arrive at, after identifying our approach and defining our research strategy.

Bryman contrasts both quantitative and qualitative researches and argues that they ‘constitute different approaches to social investigation’ (2008: 27), such a contrast, in my understanding is to give each approach its won identification. As a substantiated strategy to the conduct of social research, qualitative research provides a distinctive framework for data collection and analysis and offers divers techniques for collecting data. Some examples of qualitative research designs are, experimental, cross-sectional, longitude, and case study. As to the qualitative research methodologies, examples are, participant observation, ethnography, interviews, focus groups and conversational and textual analysis (see, Lawrence Neuman, 2003; Bryman 2008).

Correspondingly, Bryman has rightly defined, qualitative research as a ‘research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification ... it is *inductivist, constructionist, and interpretivist* but qualitative researchers do not always subscribe to all three of these features’ (emphasis added, 2008: 366). In the light of such a definition, we can show how qualitative research is conducted, and

why, and with identifying this, we attain our foundational premises on which we can build our arguments to the possibility of validity and reliability in qualitative research.

First, the logic of qualitative research is inductivist; it aims to generate theory, through making new concepts in observing social practices and events in depth, it provides a great amount of descriptive writing, and the reason as Bryman argues, is that it typically emphasizes ‘the importance of the contextual understanding of social behaviour’ (2008: 387).

Second, ontologically it is constructionist; it views the social world in terms of process, and process is ‘a sequence of individual and collective events, actions, and activities, unfolding over time in context’ (Pettigrew, 1997: 338). Process here is taken as a synonym to change in a given context, and the context is a social one - be it a group or a community that has been researched. Thus, Marshall and Rosman argue, ‘[the] assumption of an unchanging social world is in direct contrast to the qualitative/interpretive assumption that the social world is always changing’ (Marshall and Rossman, 1989: 147).

Third, epistemologically qualitative research is interpretivist: qualitative researchers believe that people attribute different meanings to their social environment, and this is their justified belief about what establishes acceptable knowledge; that is, one should ‘take the role of the other to acquire social knowledge’ (Lofland and Lonfland, 1995: 16). And the satisfactory manner to gain acceptable social knowledge is by ‘telling it like it was for them’ (Fielding, 1982: 83). For example, if one tries to know the meaning of an act performed by a social agent, one needs to ask the performer in order to know the meaning attached to the action by the social agent. In this way, to interpret a social event and ‘in order to understand social action, we must grasp the meaning that actors attach to their actions’ (Taylor, 1993: 7). Therefore, the aim is to seek meaning, not the meaning we inject to what people do, but the meaning that people attribute to what they do, this would enable us, in Armstrong’s words, to ‘see beyond mere appearances’ (Armstrong, 1993: 11). Having said this, if the quantitative researchers claim that they let the data speak, in

parallel, qualitative researchers claim that they let the observed/researched (i.e. the people) speak.

Qualitative research, as has been defined so far, can manifest the very aim of the social science which is producing credible descriptions of the social world, ‘... that in some controllable way correspondent to the social world that is being described’ (Peräkylä, 2004: 283). This is a dual-task: first to ‘produce credible descriptions’, and secondly in ‘some controllable way’.

The rest of this essay discusses the credibility of qualitative research, and since the ‘two central concepts in any discussion of the credibility of scientific research are validity and reliability’ (Silverman, 2006: 281). I will take them as two key ways of evaluating qualitative research. Accordingly, Lawrence Newman asserts that ‘most qualitative researchers accept principles of reliability and validity, but use the terms infrequently because of their close association with quantitative measurement’ (Lawrence Newman, 2003: 184). What comes in the following sections is a discussion on the possibility of qualitative research to be valid and reliable, and what I argue is the necessity to ‘... take a different perspective on the role of reliability and validity in qualitative studies’ (Rubin and Babbie, 2010: 89).

II. VALIDITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Validity, as any other concept in the social sciences, is a contested term; it means different things to different observers and there is more than one type of validity. In this section, I offer some conceptualizations of validity within the context of qualitative research. In doing so, I take qualitative researchers’ definitions for the concept and hence to identify some common characteristics of definitions and types of validity. That is, to take validity as an observable criterion in qualitative research and then to argue that it is possible for qualitative research to be properly valid.

Sarantakos (1994) has rightly asserted that validity is ‘a methodological element not only of the quantitative but also of qualitative research’ (Sarantakos, 1994: 76). Further, some scholars have used the same labels and contents of validity in quantitative strategy to evaluate the validity of qualitative research. For instance,

Lecompte and Goets, (1982) in their work 'Problems of Reliability and Validity in Ethnographic Research' mention two forms of validity in relation to qualitative research; *Internal validity*, meaning a sound contest between researcher's observation and the theoretical ideas they develop and; *external validity*, as the amount of generalizability of the findings. Some other scholars, nonetheless, have introduced different labels with slightly the same content as Guba and Lincoln (1994) in their work 'Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research' propose two key criteria for assessing validity in qualitative study; *credibility*, whether the findings are believable and *transferability*, whether the findings apply to other contexts.

Again, Sarantakos (1994) offers some other concepts associated with validation in qualitative research; *cumulative validation*, meaning findings be supported by other studies; *communicative validation*, findings be evaluated by respondents; *argumentative validation*, conclusion should be followed and tested; and *ecological validation*, using stable methods and taking into consideration the life and conditions of the researched (Sarantakos, 1994: 76-7). Silverman, identifies two other forms of validations that have been suggested as particularly appropriate to the logic of qualitative research *Triangulation*, meaning comparing different kinds of data quantitative and qualitative and different kinds of methods (observation and interview) to see whether they corroborate one another and *respondent validation* taking ones findings back to the subjects, where these people verify ones findings (Silverman, 2003: 290-1).

All the types of conceptualization of qualitative validity discussed above have two characteristics in common, first to do research in a professional, accurate and systematic manner, second, to state how research is concocted, transparently. That is to say, validity has to do with the association between data and conclusion. Therefore, in our attempt to pave a way to define validity in qualitative research we should keep in mind the fact that, as Bulmer states 'qualitative researchers try to achieve validity not through manipulation of variables but rather through their orientation towards, and the study of, the empirical world' (Bulmer, 1979: 49).

Correspondingly, Hammersley has rightly asserted that validity is identified with ‘our confidence in our knowledge but not certainty of its truth’ (1992: 50).

Having identified the common characteristics of different types of validity in qualitative study, we can present some definitions, of what validity means, (i.e. what it ‘is’) and then how it can be achieved. Hammersley affirms ‘by validity I mean ... the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers (Hammersley, 1990: 57). Kirk and Miller, also give an equivalent description that validity in qualitative research ‘concerns the interpretation of the observations whether or not the researcher is calling what is measured by the right name’ (Kirk and Miller, 1986: 69). Bryman takes validity as the ‘integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research’ (Bryman, 2008: 31). And last but not the least, Lawrence Neuman, puts validity in a concrete expression, saying ‘validity means truthful’ referring to the bridge between construct and the data (2003:185).

Based on the foregoing definitions and classifications, it can be seen that validity means the correct correlation between data and conclusion, but what is more problematic is the achievement of such an accurate relationship. This is not a challenge only to the qualitative study but to the quantitative study as well. It is Fielding and Fielding’s view that even in quantitative research ‘the most advanced survey procedures themselves only manipulate data that had to be gained at some point by asking people’ (Fielding and Fielding, 1986: 12), and the threat to a novel production of the link between reality and representation, is still present.

There are attempts to establish validity in qualitative research, for instance, Silverman (2006) *Interpreting Qualitative Data* has made such an attempt, and clearly argues, ‘we should not assume that techniques used in quantitative research are the only way of establishing the validity of findings from qualitative or research field’ (Silverman, 2006: 43). He introduces a claim to validate qualitative research, with a chain of inter-related concepts. First, *analytic induction*, which is to identify some phenomena and to generate some hypothesis then to take a small body of data to examine it. Second, *the constant comparative method*, that the qualitative researcher should always try to find another case through which to test out a

provisional hypothesis. Third is *deviant-case analysis*, to involve in different parts of the data and to make correlations between them. Fourth *comprehensive data treatment*, meaning all parts of the data must at some point be inspected and analysed, and finally, *using appropriate tabulation*, to give the reader a chance to gain a sense of the flavour of the data as whole (2006: 296-9). Thou that is a claim by an authority of the field, one can view the correspondence between the criteria mentioned by Silverman and the very nature of the qualitative research, particularly, in the case of case study and interviewing, in which the researched are a group of people and an individual.

Lamnek, (1988: 154-9) argues that ‘qualitative studies achieve higher validity’, that is because, in the qualitative research the ‘data are closer to the research field’ than in quantitative research, and in qualitative research, ‘opinions and views of the research subjects are considered; data is closer to reality; and a successive expansion of data is possible’. For example, when a researcher interviews a participant about a subject matter; answers can be taken as data, and transcripts of the interview make it possible to reinterpret and check the research. Additionally, Bryman believes that ‘qualitative research is stronger than quantitative investigations in terms of ecological validity’ (2008: 34), by ecological validity, Bryman refers to the view and the opinion of the interviewee or the participant on a subject matter in a research project, and for him this is the central theme in qualitative study. Having said this, I argue that to achieve validity in qualitative research is to reduce the gap between reality and representation and the more data and conclusion are correspondent the more a piece of qualitative research is valid.

III. REALIBILITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Quantitative and qualitative strategies ask different questions; a quantitative study might ask how people intend to vote, and the method of data collection required is surveys and questionnaire. While a qualitative study might attempt to understand what people mean by what they do in their every day behaviour, here the method differs; interviews and focus groups are appropriate. Therefore, in our discussion on a

reliable qualitative study, we should define reliability within the context of qualitative research and by taking into consideration the nature of questioning in qualitative study. To quote Sarantakos, ‘the definitions of reliability and the types of measurement of the degree of reliability must be considered when the quality of reliability in the two research contexts [i.e. quantitative and qualitative] is evaluated’ (Sarantakos, 1994: 80). In this section I will offer some interpretations to the concept of reliability and then to present the possibility of establishing reliability in qualitative study.

As it was the case with validity in discussing reliability as well scholars differ in using labels and contents. Some scholars use the same label (i.e. reliability) to refer to reliability in qualitative research but entwining the concept with a different meaning correspondent to the nature of qualitative research: an example can be found in the work of Lecompte and Goets (1982) who use the term *internal reliability*, referring to a case in which there is more than one observer agree to what is seen and heard, and *external reliability*, stating the degree to which a study can be replicated. On the contrary, some other writers introduce different labels in discussing the issue. For example, Bogumil and Immerfall (1985: 71) argue that in qualitative study instead of reliability, *coherence*, *openness* and *discourse* of the study/research should be considered, by *coherence*, they refer to the extent to which method meet the goals; *openness*, the degree to which otherwise suitable methods are allowed to be used; and *discourse*, the extent to which researchers are allowed to discuss the researched data and interpret them.

Another example is Sarantakos who instead of reliability uses dependability to ‘a constantly changing world’, and instead of objectivity uses confirmability, in his words, ‘confirming is the centre of objectivity’ and further he calls the two concepts ‘alternative ways of guaranteeing quality of research without restoring to reliability’ (Sarantakos, 1994: 77-80). To put it in other words, *dependability* is concerned with the idea whether the findings liable to apply at other times and *confirmability*, concerns the notion whether researchers allow their values to introduce to a high degree.

Sarantakos' argument emphasises generating different concepts for the same meaning. Linguistically the two terms of 'reliant' and 'dependent' are synonyms - be it 'reliable' or 'dependable' or whatever the label still the content is similar. We do not need to generate a different concept, but rather to understand the concept in a different context. Bryman offers an acceptable definition of reliability and he argues the concept is commonly used in relation to the question of whether the 'measures that are devised for concepts in the social sciences are consistent' (2008: 31). To take Bryman as reference, reliability is about the link between a measure and a concept, and within the context of qualitative study it is about generating a measurable concept. Kirk and Miller, also have an interpretation of the definition they argue that reliability is 'the degree to which the finding is independent of accidental circumstances of the research' (Kirk and Miller, 1986: 20). That is, in qualitative study, Hammersley points out, reliability refers to 'the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observers on different occasions' (Hammersley, 1992: 67).

To record the observations consistently is to have a reliable method. Similarly, Lawrence Neuman, believes that for qualitative researchers, 'reliability means dependability of consistency' and he moreover argues that qualitative researchers 'use variety of techniques (interviews, participation, documents) to record their observations consistently' (Lawrence Neuman, 2003: 184). As to the degree that reliability can be addressed in a qualitative study, opinions vary, and in my view Silverman offers a sound interpretation that reliability can be addressed by using standardized methods to write field notes and proper transcripts in the case of interviews and textual studies, and he also presents a method by which the reliability of a qualitative method can be enhanced, asserting that 'reliability can be improved by comparing the analysis of the same data by several observers' (2003: 288). Further, Silverman regards his approach 'scientific' and defines a 'scientific work' in a simplified but yet sound way that 'it is an increasingly accepted view that a work becomes scientific by adopting methods of the study appropriate to its subject matter' (Silverman, 2006: 280). In my view, Silverman attempts to make a contribution to the

social research debate, by arguing that the methods of qualitative strategy are as scientific as quantitative strategy, and in a broader sense, that the very idea and act of social research is a scientific conduct in the social sciences.

Reliability as been discussed and defined within the context of qualitative research is about the methods of conducting a research; it is a methodological concern. Therefore, the technique by which a qualitative study can be evaluated or regarded reliable is to check whether how and to what extent consistent methods and procedures are used. For instance, with proper tabulated participant observation, ethnography, qualitative interviews, focus groups and conversation analysis research, tapes and transcripts are open to supplementary examination by both researchers and readers; this would allow both to verbalize their ideas about the standpoint of the people who have been studied. Also for reliability to be calculated, it is mandatory to the qualitative researchers to document their procedure and to reveal that categories have been used consistently. This to say, it is possible for a qualitative research to be properly reliable.

CONCLUSION

In this essay I made an attempt to prove that it is possible for qualitative research to be properly valid and reliable. This essay, however, was not a comparison between quality (i.e. validity and reliability) in qualitative and quantitative researches, but rather the quality of qualitative research as such, what is called by some writers the credibly of qualitative study (see Silverman, 2006). In this concluding section, I sum the main points of this paper and state the core argument in relation to the essay question.

What can be drawn from content of this essay is that qualitative research should be studied as a separate research strategy, but nonetheless, complementary to the qualitative strategy within the context of social research debate, and on the larger social research spectrum (i.e. not accepting one on the refusal of the other or but a spectrum from qualitative to quantitative strategies and vice versa). That is, we better

understand what qualitative research is in relation to quantitative research. We argued that the current debate in the social science research is one between those two distinct strategies, and additionally I argued that the question whether it is possible for qualitative research to be properly valid and reliable, is central to the debate and this interpretation to the question can be regarded as a contribution to the debate. Needless to say, there can be, and actually are more than one interpretation, mine was one based on the very definitions of ‘concepts’ the core concept in the addressed question namely: research, qualitative study, validity and reliability. First and foremost, I took research as a dialectical interaction of the researcher with the social world through question and answer. And I identified perceptions and views of the researcher as the underlying premise for such a dynamic engagement with the social world, how to perceive it ontologically, how to understand it epistemologically, and hence how to establish an identified role of theory in relation to research. Qualitative research, as this essay argued, is a proper engagement with the social world, having its constructionist ontology, interpretivist epistemology, and inductivist logic to the role of generating theory in relation to research.

Moreover, in this essay I relied on the definitions given by scholars within qualitative research and across the social research context. The reason for this logic was, in order to know what we argue, first we need to define our concepts, and then to understand similar concepts (validity and reliability) in different contexts (quantitative and qualitative). Based on identified interpretation to qualitative research, and common definitions to the notions of validity and reliability, this essay made an attempt to concertize the three concepts and then to make a correlation amongst them. Yet it should be kept in mind, the aim of this essay was not identify the relationship between validity and reliability, but rather to identify the position of each in relation to qualitative study and in my view that is the prime concern of the essay question; as I interpret, the possibility of having a qualitative research properly valid, and the possibility of having a qualitative research properly reliable.

The essay argued that validity in qualitative research concerns the relationship between the data and the construct, the findings and the conclusion, the reality and

the representation; in other words, validity is the other name for acceptable social knowledge. Having this in mind, this essay persuasively argued that in qualitative research the possibility of validity rises with effort to reduce the gap between a social reality that have been researched and representation that the research produces, this is, the more data and conclusion in a piece of qualitative research are correspondent the more it is valid.

Regarding reliability, I argued that in qualitative research it refers to the methods of research conduct and to what extend the concepts used, appropriately, describe what they ought to describe. Here, ‘concepts’ were taken as names given to common features, to generate ideas and organize observation. In such a context, reliability is entwined with the notion of consistency of a case, which is allocated for the same category by different observers. Thus, this essay confirmed the possibility to achieve a properly reliable qualitative research, and argued that the degree of reliability in a qualitative study can be improved with proper tabulated data of findings that are open to supplementary examination by both researchers and readers to enable them articulate their views about the position of the researched, in relation to the research and the researcher. Therefore to calculate reliability in qualitative research, it is required form the researchers to document their procedure and to show that categories have been used consistently. In this way, with taking into consideration the context of qualitative study, this essay as one interpretation of the question, persuasively argued that it is possible for qualitative research to be properly valid and reliable.

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