

# The language of research (part 19): Understanding the quality of a qualitative paper (1)

**KEY WORDS**

- ▶ Authenticity
- ▶ Confirmability
- ▶ Credibility
- ▶ Dependability
- ▶ Rigour
- ▶ Trustworthiness

In previous papers in this series, we looked at some of the ways in which the quality of a quantitative paper can be assessed; namely through the validity and reliability of the studies (Ellis, 2015a; Ellis, 2015b). We identified that these features allow us to have some faith in research findings because they show that the research examined the question it set out to and did so in a clear and reproducible manner, thereby, producing observations we can trust.

Qualitative research is not subject to the same quality rules as quantitative research and the approaches it employs are significantly different. That said, there are questions which can, and should, be asked regarding quality that the nurse or other care professional should be aware of when considering its applicability to their own practice.

This paper, the first in a two-part series on understanding the quality of qualitative research, looks at some of the ways in which qualitative papers can demonstrate their quality. It also looks at some of the questions the informed reader might ask of a qualitative paper when reading it.

**WHY ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT QUALITY IS IMPORTANT**

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not seek to be generalisable — that is, readily applicable to all similar persons and situations. Still, the findings from it may, and often are, used to inform practice. In qualitative research the applicability to other similar situations is termed transferability. If professionals choose to use the findings from qualitative research to inform their practice, they need to critique how good that research is first.

If poor quality research is used to inform changes in practice or our understanding of a situation or phenomenon, it may lead to changes that are detrimental to a healthcare professional's practice and its service users, or which jeopardise patient welfare.

**TRUSTWORTHINESS**

Trustworthiness is a term used to signify how much faith, or trust, can be placed in the findings of a piece of qualitative research. Trustworthiness refers to the collective effect of various measures of the quality of

the research process used and the way in which the methods, analysis and findings of the research are presented. Key markers of the trustworthiness of a piece of qualitative research include: its credibility, transferability (as discussed above), the rigour applied to the research process, its authenticity and confirmability.

In this respect, trustworthiness is the headline term that relates to the quality of a qualitative research study (Ellis, 2016).

**CREDIBILITY**

As in the day-to-day use of the word, credibility refers to how believable the research is. It is similar to validity in quantitative research, in that it asks the question as to whether the way in which the piece of research has been undertaken is sufficient to answer the question, or questions, it set out to answer. Therefore, it asks questions of the processes and methods used to collect the data. Polit and Beck (2017) suggest credibility refers to the amount of confidence the reader has that the findings presented are truthful and accurate.

Furthermore, Polit and Beck (2017) suggest one way of increasing the credibility of a study is to collect that data in more than one way to deduce if the different approaches lead to the same result. One example of this is a process called triangulation — data is collected both through observation and interviews. This can be used to prove that people act in the manner in which they say they act; it can increase the credibility of findings ascertained from interviewing subjects.

**DEPENDABILITY**

In quantitative research, the consistency of the data collection techniques is termed reliability. Reliability requires that all data collectors involved in a study are trained to approach data collection in the same way. It also ensures the data collection is reproducible. If data collection in the quantitative paradigm is reliable, it will always obtain the same, or a very similar, result when measuring the same phenomenon — at least at roughly the same time.

In qualitative research on the other hand, the notion of dependability recognises that the contexts within which people operate are constantly changing. Thus,

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rather than try to obtain outputs which are consistent, the researcher has to describe the changes within the setting in which the research is taking place and how this impacted on the ways in which the data for the study were collected. In this way, we can depend on the understanding and description of the context to tell us, the reader, what was happening during the process of the research.

**RIGOUR**

In quantitative research, and especially in experiment studies such as randomised controlled trials, the processes that must be followed to ensure the reliability and validity of the study are well established. In qualitative research this is often not the case, but the qualitative researcher may employ a number of strategies within their data collection and analysis processes which they explain within the write up. In identifying the strategies used the credibility and dependability of the research is enhanced and when this is demonstrable to the reader, the paper is said to show rigour.

Describing the manner in which data collection methods were undertaken is a key strategy used to demonstrate rigour. Another thing to consider is how well the data analysis is undertaken and described, and how open and transparent the researchers have been in describing what they have done and the reasons for it. Also examine how well the researchers have described why they have made the choices they have made. For example, choices made regarding: how to collect the data or how to interpret the findings, who was involved, and how (if at all) their interpretations were checked with the subjects of the research. In summary, rigour refers to how much thought and effort has been put into the research process.

**CONFIRMABILITY**

Good qualitative research starts from a neutral premise and allows the findings to emerge unfettered with prior assumptions from the data as collected. This approach, as opposed to working to prove an idea or hypothesis, is called being inductive. The best qualitative papers demonstrate their neutrality, this emergence of findings, and are therefore said to demonstrate

confirmability (Polit and Beck, 2017). If data have emerged from a largely inductive process of data collection and interpretation, then different people will, in all likelihood, come to a similar understanding of the phenomenon of interest regardless of the stance they might take.

To this extent, confirmability really refers to the degree to which the findings from the research can be corroborated, or confirmed, by other people or indeed by the research processes employed. Examples might include being clear about how the data was checked and rechecked to ensure nothing was missed, or ensuring other people check the data to see what emerges for them. Another useful approach is for the researcher to look for and describe in the write up any cases that differed from the norm, so that the reader can make up their own mind.

**AUTHENTICITY**

Polit and Beck (2017) describe how when a piece of research is authentic, it shows all of the realities which are represented within the group under study. Research reports achieve this when the reader gets a feel for the lives of the people within the study as they are lived. They describe this feeling as enabling the reader to gain a vicarious experience of living in the world of the people described in the study. In doing this, the reader is able to develop a sensitivity to what the study is about and the ideas it describes. Good research papers therefore give the reader a real feel for the experience being described.

**CONCLUSIONS**

We have examined some of the elements that determine the quality of a piece of qualitative research. We have identified that it is important for such papers to maintain quality and for the reader to know what to look for so that the findings of research can be used to inform practice. We have compared how some of the ideas about quality reflect those from the quantitative paradigm, while others reject the assumptions that quantitative research is based on.

Next we will look at some of the strategies the researcher can use to ensure that they meet some of the thresholds for quality described in this paper: **WUK**

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