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*Validity in qualitative research revisited*

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**ABSTRACT** Concerns with the issues of validity in qualitative research have dramatically increased. Traditionally, validity in qualitative research involved determining the degree to which researchers' claims about knowledge corresponded to the reality (or research participants' construction of reality) being studied. The authors note that recent trends have shown the emergence of two quite different approaches to the validity question within the literature on qualitative research. The authors categorize and label these 'transactional' validity and 'transformational' validity. While useful, the authors assert that neither approach is sufficient to meet the current needs of the field. The authors propose a recursive, process-oriented view of validity as an alternative framework.

**KEYWORDS:** *qualitative research, research validity*

### *Introduction*

Issues related to validity in qualitative research have been addressed for more than half a century (Atkinson et al., 2003). Recently, concerns about validity in qualitative research have increased. This is true internationally (see e.g. Bradbury and Reason, 2001; Seale, 1999), and seems especially true in our current country of residence, the USA.

In the USA, this increased attention is in part due to federal attempts to generally discredit qualitative research and its accompanying validity constructs. For example, *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* calls for 'scientifically based research' and defines this as 'the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to get reliable and valid knowledge. The research ... must employ rigorous data analysis to test the stated hypothesis ... The definition includes the expectation that the studies are replicable' (AACTE, 2002: 2; NRC, 2002). Replicability, testing hypotheses, and objective procedures are not common terms in qualitative researchers' vocabularies. Additionally, Flinders

(2003) asserts that the US Department of Education's *Strategic Plan 2002–2007* supports only 'studies that are backed by "qualified scientists," that "address causal questions," and that employ "randomized experimental designs." Many in education will recognize these as code words for limiting research to a small and elite strand of discipline-based, quantitative studies' (pp. 380–1). Reminiscent of the paradigm wars, qualitative research, validity safeguards included, is the object of intense scrutiny and critique.

Many international scholars have addressed validity concerns in action research (Bradbury and Reason, 2001), in ethnography (Hammersley, 1998; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), in discourse or conversational analysis (Seale, 1999), in feminist/poststructural research (Lather, 1993, 2001), in sociology (Richardson, 1997), in psychology (Kvale, 1989, 1995), and in social science and applied fields including education (Eisenhart and Howe, 1992; Maxwell, 1992; Smith, 1984; Wolcott, 1990). Traditionally, validity in qualitative research involves determining the degree to which researchers' claims about knowledge correspond to the reality (or research participants' constructions of reality) being studied (Eisner and Peshkin, 1990). Basic methods for dealing with issues of validity are discovered in most introductory qualitative research textbooks (Glesne, 1999; Lancy, 1993; Merriam, 1992; Mills, 2003; Patton, 2001; Rossman and Rallis, 1998).

In recent years, two quite different approaches to the validity question within the literature on qualitative research have emerged. One approach – here labeled the *transactional* approach – is grounded in active interaction between the inquiry and the research participants by means of an array of techniques such as member checking (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln and Guba, 1985, 2000), bracketing (Moustakas, 1994), and triangulation (Denzin, 1989, 2000, 2003; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 230–2; Seale, 1999: 53–61). Second, a more radical approach challenges the very notion of validity, even a constructed one (see e.g. Lather, 1986; Wolcott, 1990). This challenge to, or, in extreme cases, rejection of validity judges work to be valid only if it signals that validity achieves an eventual ideal. We call this *transformational* validity.

While others provide conceptions of validity that do not closely align with either transactional or transformational views, these too, we believe, are inadequate. For example, Creswell and Miller (2000) provide their view of determining validity questions. They suggest that the conception of validity that is appropriate is dependent upon the inquiry paradigms being engaged. Creswell and Miller's analysis is problematic, however, because it is based primarily upon a narrowly defined nature of choice connected to overlapping modes of inquiry.

We do agree, however, that the conception of validity that is appropriate is dependent upon the inquiry paradigms being engaged. In this sense, we are comfortable with Seale's (1999) approach to the relationship between claims and evidence. Seale's conception, like our proposal, seeks a middle ground for

validity conceptualization between the extremes of scientific and poststructuralist/emancipatory approaches. He 'regards claims as always subject to possible revision by new evidence' (p. 52).

The purposes of this article are, first, to critically examine the two general approaches to validity in qualitative research alluded to earlier. Second, in a search for an alternative view of validity, we specifically probe Donmoyer's (2001) proposal for making sense of the contemporary field of qualitative research as a whole, and deliberately extend it to the issues of validity that should be addressed. And, third, a holistic view of validity in qualitative research is alternatively suggested. This article makes explicit a discourse of validity in qualitative research by reflecting on what matters most in theory and practice.

Although this article is written from the perspectives of two educational qualitative researchers, we believe that our arguments are applicable to scholars practicing many forms or variations of qualitative research such as ethnography, case study, action research, and so on. Additionally, researchers in other disciplines such as sociology or anthropology may also find useful implications. The proposed validity framework leaves the door open to those in other disciplines to pursue context-appropriate application.

Our narrative on validity in qualitative research provides a way to reconstruct a mutually incompatible methodological 'contrast between diversity and control' in education (Hammersley, 2002: 102). This view values a recursive, open process in qualitative inquiry and gives us an analytic tool by which to identify a methodological relationship among the research purposes, questions, and processes. In judging the usefulness of our claims, we realize that we must rely not just on our 'assumption about our plausibility and credibility, but also on what we take as likely to be the judgments of other members of the research community' (Hammersley, 1998: 69). Therefore, we hope other scholars from a variety of contexts and disciplines respond to our proposals.

### *Two general approaches to validity*

In this section, our understanding of theories of validity in qualitative research is presented. In doing so, we critically review major theoretical assertions of validity and relate these to our own frame of reference labelled *transactional* versus *transformational* validity. We define transactional validity in qualitative research as an interactive process between the researcher, the researched, and the collected data that is aimed at achieving a relatively higher level of accuracy and consensus by means of revisiting facts, feelings, experiences, and values or beliefs collected and interpreted. The role and use of transactional validity in qualitative research varies to the extent the researcher believes it achieves a level of certainty.

On the other hand, we define transformational validity in qualitative research as a progressive, emancipatory process leading toward social change

that is to be achieved by the research endeavor itself. Such a process in qualitative research, as a critical element in changing the existing social condition of the researched, involves a deeper, self-reflective, empathetic understanding of the researcher while working with the researched. More detailed reviews of these two major approaches to validity in qualitative research follow.

#### TRANSACTIONAL VALIDITY

To a large extent, this approach assumes that qualitative research can be more credible as long as certain techniques, methods, and/or strategies are employed during the conduct of the inquiry. In other words, techniques are seen as a medium to insure an accurate reflection of reality (or at least, participants' constructions of reality). Lincoln and Guba's (1985) widely known notion of trustworthiness in 'naturalistic inquiry' is grounded in this approach. In seeking trustworthiness, researchers attend to research credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Seale (1999) labels this approach 'interpretivist criteriology' (pp. 42–6). Validity approaches described by Maxwell (1992) as 'descriptive' and 'interpretive' also proceed in usage of transactional processes.

Among other techniques, member checking is 'the most crucial technique for establishing credibility' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 314; see also Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 227–30). Member checking occurs throughout the inquiry, and is a process in which collected data is 'played back' to the informant to check for perceived accuracy and reactions. Lincoln and Guba, though advocates of the process, are concerned about the way in which informants are often situated in an adversarial position. Lincoln and Guba hope informants 'may be able to agree that reconstructions are fair even if they are not in total agreement with them' (p. 315). If not, it is incumbent upon the researcher to note this incongruity. Further, while reassuring us of the value of the member check, Lincoln and Guba offer a caveat about when member checking should not be used, when 'one has reason to doubt the integrity of informants' (p. 315). Others, such as Wolcott (1990), also emphasize the transactional validity aspect. He writes that in an effort to increase validity, he shared his 'manuscripts with informed readers as part of this process of analyzing and writing' (p. 132). He also urges qualitative researchers to record and write accurately, seek feedback, and report fully.

In sum, validity as a transactional process consists of techniques or methods by which misunderstandings can be adjusted and thus fixed. In most cases informants are engaged in making sure their realities correspond with the interpretations brought forth by the researchers. In transactional approaches, validity of the text/account is of primary importance.

We argue that certain aspects remain unresolved. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) and Wolcott's (1990) approaches to validity as transactional between techniques and reality are not ones that 'automatically' guarantee knowledge claims just because the researcher employs those techniques. In fact, Wolcott's

own experiences (1990) belie this notion. Researchers' construction of realities will inevitably be reconstructions, interpretations. In doing so, the researcher seeks to construct 'what these objects, events, and behaviors *mean* to the people engaged in and with them' (Maxwell, 1992: 288). This quest for factual accuracy reminds us of Henri Magritte's painting *The Treachery of Images* (1929). A pipe is depicted with the caption: 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' ('this is not a pipe'). Magritte was noting that, no matter how accurate, 'the representation of a pipe is no pipe...neither the word nor the picture of the object can assure us that the object really exists' (Pacquet, 2000: 68).

Before moving on to the other approach, transformational validity in qualitative research, it is important to discuss the evolution of theoretical perspectives associated with member checking and its relationship to another transactional technique or method, triangulation. Triangulation is referred to as 'the use of multiple methods ... [to] partially overcome the deficiencies that flow from one investigation or one method' (Denzin, 1989: 236). Theoretically, efforts to triangulate data, method, researcher, and theory to bolster accuracy and reliability are all convergent with the inherent logic of transactional validity in qualitative research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 230–2). Methodologists' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Patton, 1980) reasons and explanations vary but, generally, triangulation is seen as another powerful means to an end. Relying on the virtues of triangulation, the researcher believes that this technique, like member checking, will lead to a more consistent, objective picture of reality (Mathison, 1989). For example, Seale (1999), after pointing out criticisms of triangulation, asserts that 'triangulation, then, if used with due caution, can enhance the credibility of a research account by providing an additional way of generating evidence in support of key claims' (p. 61).

There is a theoretical difference between member checking (reassuring the credibility of constructions of the participants) and triangulation (verifying facts through multiple data sources). Despite this difference, Guba and Lincoln (1989), in line with the transactional perspective, speculate that an active use of these two strategies advantages the researcher. Their position related to triangulation and member checking, however, has evolved. In their earlier work they assert, 'member checking is directed at a judgment of overall credibility, while triangulation is directed at a judgment of the accuracy of specific data items' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 315–16). But, in later writing they (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) note, 'triangulation itself carries too positivist an implication, to wit, that there exist unchanging phenomena so that triangulation can logically *be* a check' (p. 240). Key here is the fact that, despite their move in a more constructivist direction, Guba and Lincoln, and other advocates of transactional validity processes, believe that researchers guided by transactional validity criteria pursue the likelihood that there is a possibility for a greater, more accurate, objective truth that can be achieved by the use of certain methods.

Seale (1999) suggests two types of what he terms 'member validation.' In 'weak' forms, convergence on an account is desired. Alternatively, 'strong'

forms are likely to generate additional questions for researchers to answer, rather than confirming a particular version (Seale, 1999: 72). Transactionalists, we believe, will welcome this strategical distinction as another way to make their findings valid and truthful.

The theoretical distinction between member checking and triangulation may not be important, as the aim of the transactions is the same. Transactional processes that attempt to make sense of what actually happens in context can be seen on a continuum between the positivist (validity can be absolutely achieved) and the constructivist view (validity can never be achieved, but instead needs to be checked endlessly) (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). Transactionalists privilege the research account and employ strategies such as triangulation and member checking to bolster its integrity.

#### TRANSFORMATIONAL VALIDITY

The idea of validity as transformational begins with a problem of validation that plagues some qualitative researchers interested in making explicit the value-laden nature of social, cultural, and political meanings in macro and micro contexts. Thus, this approach is consistent with what Marcus and Fisher (1986) refer to as 'the crisis of representation.' It makes sense that meanings are social constructions and multiple perspectives on a topic yield multiple meanings. Therefore, the question of validity in itself is convergent with the way the researcher self-reflects, both explicitly and implicitly, upon the multiple dimensions in which the inquiry is conducted. In this respect, validity is not so much something that can be achieved solely by way of certain techniques. Transformationalists assert that because traditional or positivist inquiry is no longer seen as an absolute means to truth in the realm of human science, alternative notions of validity should be considered to achieve social justice, deeper understandings, broader visions and other legitimate aims of qualitative research. In this sense, it is the ameliorative aspects of the research that achieve (or do not achieve) its validity. Validity is determined by the resultant actions prompted by the research endeavor.

Methodologically, Lather (1986, 1993), Richardson (1997) and others (Lenzo, 1995; Scheurich, 1996) propose a transgressive approach to validity that emphasizes a higher degree of self-reflexivity. For example, qualitative researchers are encouraged to examine meanings that are taken for granted and to create 'analytic practices' in which meanings are both deconstructed and reconstructed in a way that makes initial connotations more fruitful. Advocates of transgressive approaches believe that, when such analytic practices are seen as ironic, the qualitative work is valid (Lather, 1986: 68; see also Kvale, 1995: 27–30 for similar validity questions). In our view, transgressive approaches are a subset of the larger transformational category.

Issues that are addressed in transformational validation need to be carefully understood. A lack of clear working definitions is evident in terms of how the analytic reconstruction of realities must be undertaken in practice, but



perhaps this inherent ambiguity is the point. Examples of transformational approaches include the following: Richardson (1997) describes an image of validity that 'combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach' (p. 92). This 'crystallization' aims to change the researcher's relationships with the researched, and is an attempt at 'changing one's relationship to one's work' (Richardson, 1997: 167). Lather, among a variety of other validity propositions, has proposed a 'catalytic validity' described as 'the degree to which the research empowers and emancipates the research subjects' (Scheurich, 1996: 4). Following Foucault, Kvale (1995) suggests 'pragmatic validity' that raises the issue of power, i.e. where is the power to decide the desired results of a study? Lastly, Beverley (2000: 556) has proposed 'Testimonio' as a qualitative research strategy. Again, these first person narratives find their validity in their ability to raise consciousness and thus provoke political action to remedy problems of oppressed peoples (e.g. poverty, marginality, exploitation).

### *Validity and the purposes of qualitative research*

The proliferation of paradigms as basic worldviews in qualitative research has come of age (Donmoyer, 1996, 1999). The two categorical approaches explored in this article are ones that grew out of paradigmatic differences within overlapping modes of inquiry. In order to more constructively include, honor, and productively utilize differences within qualitative research, we employ and extend Donmoyer's (2001) framework of five overarching purposes undergirding contemporary qualitative research. He develops this framework on the grounds that 'grand paradigm talks' are misleading, primarily because some methodologists have a tendency to either *exaggerate* or *undermine* differences in modes of inquiry (for more information with regard to the problematic nature of paradigm proliferation, see Donmoyer, 2001: 175–89).

Such tendencies in the practice of educational research lead to narrow, idiosyncratic definitions of validity. In an effort to create room for a flexible, useful, and integrated theory of validity supported by a broad array of qualitative researchers, we attempt to incorporate concerns of validity into Donmoyer's (2001) alternative approach by the inclusion of the third and fourth columns in Table 1.

The coupling of major concerns of validity with each purpose-question (outlined by Donmoyer) leads us to a better understanding of how key validity concerns within each purpose can be, need to be, or should be differentiated from one another. Although there are some commonalities among the five qualitative purposes, it is clear that concerns of validity in all the purposes are differently focused.

Our holistic view of validity (presented in the following section of this article) takes all these things into consideration. To this end, we conceive of this

TABLE 1. *Use of validity in five overarching purposes undergirding contemporary qualitative research*

<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Fundamental questions</i>	<i>Validity as a process</i>	<i>Major validity criteria</i>
<b>'Truth' seeking</b>	What is the correct answer?	Progressive induction	Member check as technical Causality-based triangulation
<b>Thick description</b>	How do the people under study interpret phenomena?	Holistic Prolong engagement	Triangulated, descriptive data Accurate knowledge of daily life Member check as recursive
<b>Developmental</b>	How does an organization change over time?	Categorical/back and forth	Rich archives reflecting history Triangulated, member check as ongoing
<b>Personal essay</b>	What is the researcher's personal interpretation?	Reflexive/aesthetic	Self-assessment of experience Public appeal of personal opinion of a situation
<b>Praxis/Social</b>	How can we learn and change educators, organizations or both?	Inquiry with participants	Member check as reflexive Critical reflexivity of self Redefinition of the status quo



framework as a conceptual bridge for understanding how concerns of validity need to be reconfigured as we extend Donmoyer's (2001) way of making sense of the field of qualitative research in the era of paradigm proliferation.

As presented in the table, our emphasis is on pointing out ways in which qualitative researchers are holistically engaged within (to some extent, between or among) the specific territory of their purpose-based qualitative inquiry. In this sense, the researcher(s) must explicitly consider the degree to which the research purpose, question, and actual acts intertwine with an embedded, process view of validity. Specifically, our notion of 'validity as a process' can be equated with a reflective journal that makes transparent the subjective process now made explicit for research consumers. This opens up validity and necessitates explicit attention to the inclusion of validity considerations throughout the inquiry. This process view moves the concept from an application of 'the right criteria at the right time' to a process of 'thinking out loud' about researcher concerns, safeguards, and contradictions continually. In other words, validity becomes ever present and recursive as opposed to either a 'step' in a linear sequence or an over-reliance on subjectivity.

Our explanation following each purpose and question should not be understood as fixed, or as attempting to redefine certain techniques or constructs that have been differently interpreted by different people, e.g. member checking.<sup>1</sup> Instead, our rationale for certain techniques or constructs explained in the context of these five overarching purposes in qualitative research is in favor of a post-paradigmatic stance that 'acceptance of a particular purpose does not require that one posit the existence of a unique epistemology, at least not in an era when most scholars concede that knowledge is a human construction and that answers to empirical questions are relative to the particular linguistic and theoretical frames used to pose particular questions' (Donmoyer, 2001: 190). In this regard, a critical re/examination of commonly adopted techniques or constructs for validity in the literature should be seen as part of our research community's continuing quest to ascertain where we are and what needs to be done. This never-ending effort should be based extensively upon what has *already* been accomplished in these matters, both theoretically and practically.

#### VALIDITY IN THE 'TRUTH' SEEKING PURPOSE

The term *truth* can no longer be accepted in today's research community the same way it was in the past. However, for some researchers, *truth* is still viewed as a single determining criterion. Whether findings are to be truthful, credible, or effective is mainly determined by the empirical data gathered. To this end, researchers in the 'truth' seeking tradition formulate the questions to be answered in conjunction with an a priori theory that is supposed to be measured and thus tested. Contextual variables are considered important but largely believed under control (Donmoyer, 2001: 190).

Some in the educational research community, both quantitative and qualitative researchers, continue to believe that the absolute achievement of

validity is desirable, necessary, and possible. Recently, Maxwell (2004) has argued that, in fact, the optimal approach will be to combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies, validity issues, and applications for their complementary nature. In terms of ontological assumption, there are those who believe that there can and should be correspondence between a researcher's account of some phenomenon and what has actually happened or been construed to happen. The one-to-one correspondence between reality and its reconstruction is typically analogous to an image of a mirror that reflects things as they are without distortion. In doing so, the researcher employs a conceptual-analytic framework that guides data collection and analysis in a very technical way. The major strategy involves explicating causality among data, both rigorously and logically (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1997). In this regard, the conception of validity as a process in the 'truth' seeking purpose is *progressive induction* through which data need to be collected, analyzed, interpreted, triangulated, and thus represent 'what is' through a credible, corresponding account. We cannot help but be reminded of Magritte's 'non-pipe.'

In conjunction with our understanding of transactional validity for those who believe that the truth is out there, one of the major validity criterion is the use of *technical member checks*. Simply put, researchers are advised to make sure that data collected are accurate in terms of a vis-a-vis agreement with participants. With regard to the theory of triangulation, as discussed earlier, researchers are advised to make sure that data to be represented in their report are confirmed to be truthful based upon a factual reference. Whether texts are truthful or not is conceptually predetermined by the methodological employment of both member checks and triangulation. Member checking reassures the accuracy of the participants' constructions, and triangulation verifies and checks specific facts collected across data sources. In 'truth' seeking research, the coupling of these two concepts pursues a possibility that there is an absolute, perceived existence of validity in its own right.

#### VALIDITY IN THE THICK DESCRIPTION PURPOSE

The primary concern of this qualitative research purpose is not with identifying effectiveness or causal relationships as in the 'truth' seeking purpose, but, instead, focuses on explicating the unique, idiosyncratic meanings and perspectives constructed by individuals, groups, or both who live/act in a particular context. Maxwell (1992) has termed this 'interpretive validity.' Furthermore, theory development has little to do with this inquiry purpose. As the term *thick description*, coined by Geertz (1973), indicates, its heavy emphasis is on constructing texts in which rich descriptions are salient and in harmony with analytic interpretations. Rather than attempting to draw grand conclusions that can be transferable to other contexts (as with the 'truth' seeking purpose), those concerned with thick description purposes delve into interpreting locally

constructed meanings from the emic or insider's worldview (Donmoyer, 2001: 190–1).

Validity as a process in the thick description purpose is holistic and necessitates prolonged engagement. This is familiar territory for qualitative researchers. An understanding of a reality in a certain context at a certain time can be better achieved in ways that proceed holistically. Given the fact that meanings that people being studied construct are typically unique, understanding may be incomplete unless all things are taken into account as a whole. Furthermore, an understanding of participants' worldviews under study may be insufficient without situating meanings in context. For the contextual meaning to emerge in this thick description purpose, prolonged engagement from the side of the researcher is viewed as a necessary condition. Under the concern of validity as a process in thick description, major validity criteria that should be implemented are: (1) the extent to which data are descriptively presented; as Wolcott (1990: 129) would say, 'let readers "see" for themselves;' and, (2) the researcher's competence in making sense of the daily life of his or her participants. Thick description researchers rely on holistic processes, prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking as transactional assurances (Geertz, 1973).

The end product in this thick description purpose does not claim the transferability that accompanies 'truth' seeking qualitative research or external validity in quantitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). We argue that the thickly described text in this purpose needs to be understood more broadly than the truthfully described text in the 'truth' seeking purpose. This is because, in ontological assumption, advocates of the thick description purpose believe that correspondence between actualities and texts is neither possible nor necessary. It is the interpretive component that matters. This theory of validity makes it clear that a one-to-one correspondence between reality and observation is never achievable and may not even be a major aim of those whose work is especially grounded in an interpretive research field. Still open are the questions, 'who are these reports/accounts for, and what are their aims?' Transactional methods are apparent, but, depending upon the answers to these two questions, the notion of transformative validity may also come into play in this purpose.

#### VALIDITY IN THE DEVELOPMENTAL PURPOSE

At the center of the developmental purpose in qualitative research is the notion of temporality that involves a shared interest of individuals, or groups, or both, in development over time. The themes to be investigated may vary, but mainly fall on a continuum between a comprehensive investigation of what happens over time and a systematic inquiry into explaining how things make progress stage by stage. The former type of research, like the thick description purpose, is highly concerned with describing what has happened over a long

time and why, while the latter type of research, like the 'truth' seeking purpose, is focused on building a more generalizable, interpreted stage theory. Owing to the overlapping nature with the previous purposes of 'truth' seeking and thick description, the developmental purpose has little value other than as a pedagogical exemplar, i.e. helping some teachers of qualitative research make distinctions between studies that required the elicitation of life history data and studies in which standard interview methods could be used (Donmoyer, 2001: 191–2). Validity as a process in the developmental purpose falls into categorical schemes or stages. In order to value the notion of temporality, what is needed is the categorical scheme or stage that consists of a series of mutually exclusive themes or developments specific to a period of time. Toward re/constructing schemes or stages of development over time, developmental researchers are concerned with collecting rich archives reflecting historical events or happenings. Owing to the changing nature of temporality, researchers are also advised to conduct ongoing member checks, rather than a wholesale member check at the end of the research report process. We suggest that validity in the developmental purpose is oriented as transactional in most instances, but transformational if the primary purpose of the research account has an impact on subsequent organizational developments (Huberman, 1989; Smith, 1982).

#### VALIDITY IN THE PERSONAL ESSAY PURPOSE

Like the thick description purpose, the primary concern of the personal essay purpose is with explicating the meanings that the researched construct. What makes this inquiry purpose different, however, is that the researcher's subjectivity is intentionally front and center in research reports/accounts. In this regard, work that values the researcher's intentional subjectivity in textual representation is different from that constituted in the thick description purpose. Certainly, the difference is a matter of degree rather than a matter of kind. Those concerned with the thick description purpose attempt to reduce their own influence by using native languages, symbols, and ascribed meanings as much as possible. The fact that the researcher's own subjectivity is foregrounded in the personal essay purpose makes it clear for the reader to reflect on the following question, 'does the researcher's work lead me to see educational phenomena differently and to think of educational questions in different ways?' (Donmoyer, 2001: 192–3).

Questions asked in the personal essay purpose fall under reflexive and aesthetic validity processes. The value of the researcher's heightened reflexive and/or aesthetic capacity is linked to naturally oriented, commonly accepted validity concerns outlined in the qualitative research and arts literature. Validity criteria in the personal essay purpose include, but are not limited to, empathetic, contextual, explanatory, descriptive, persuasive, or creative criteria.

The researcher's foregrounded subjectivity involves self-assessment of experience and/or public appeal of personal opinion. Self-assessment refers to

the exclusive demonstration of the researcher's construction of self on his or her own. In essence, the experiential understanding of self surrounding educative issues should be represented in a public appeal of personal opinion that makes it possible to help the reader come to a new way of understanding a phenomenon or event under investigation.

When the focus is turned completely inward, personal essay becomes autoethnography:

an autoethnographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural...usually written in first-person voice, autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms – short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 739)

Autoethnography focuses specifically on reflexivity and self consciousness.

In the personal essay purpose of qualitative research, a mix of personal and systematic validity criteria can be adopted. The account should speak to the lay person. Commonly adopted validity criteria need to be incorporated in harmony with this research purpose. For instance, given the argument that there is a pure sense of neither objectivity nor subjectivity, the researcher in this purpose tries to go in-between to demonstrate a better way of communicative credibility.

Specifically, the emphasis of the personal essay purpose is on personal encounter with experience and encounters with individuals' constructions of personal experiences. These accounts should be assessed in terms of alternative validity criteria designed for *human inquiry* or *new paradigm research* that deals with experiential issues. Accounts should be viewed as 'descriptive...[a] dialectical view of truth as becoming...that there are always emerging possibilities which are not yet included' and should probe 'meaning' by asking 'is it useful? and is it illuminating?', as opposed to considering 'is it right?' (Reason and Rowan, 1981: 243–4). On the grounds that work in the personal essay purpose becomes more fruitful and achieves its aims by facilitating the explication of the latent consciousness of the reader and/or researcher, we argue that transformative validity seems self-evident in both personal essay and autoethnographic purposes (Eisner, 1994; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Grumet, 1980; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Pinar, 1994; Reed-Danahay, 1997).

#### VALIDITY IN THE PRAXIS/SOCIAL CHANGE PURPOSE

A key aspect of the praxis/social change purpose of qualitative research lies in the relationship between researcher and researched. Change efforts become integral parts of the research design. In order for authentic change to occur, collaborative relationships between researcher and researched should be manifested during (and after) the research process. Authority, power, or privilege deployed, both implicitly and explicitly, from the side of the researcher needs to

be deconstructed if not discarded entirely if the researcher hopes to make a realistic difference in either schools or society.

The scope and depth of the praxis/social change purpose varies. In general, the purposes of praxis/social change may be largely divided into two groups of scholarship. The first is interested in making sense of complex classroom and school (or other organizational) practices with aims of improving the quality of daily operations and interactions through better-informed decision-making processes. For example, this is often the case in collaborative action research efforts undertaken by practitioners. In contrast, the other group, critical and postmodern theorists equipped with theoretical constructs of race, class, gender, and/or power, attempt to radically change the status quo of schooling and/or society in which inequality or injustice has been taken for granted (Donmoyer, 2001: 193–4). McTaggart (1991) references Habermas in differentiating these two group approaches as practical versus emancipatory.

Since the praxis/social change purpose has blossomed over the last decade, there is a need to pay more attention to concerns of validity within these purposeful paradigmatic positionings. Validity as a process in the praxis/social change purpose involves inquiry with and on behalf of participants. Validity claims in this purpose are determined in part by the extent to which collaboratively involved participants are co-researchers in the research process. The warranted validity, of course, will be at risk if the relationship between researcher and researched is unequal, exploitative, or not taken seriously. To this end, major validity criteria that should be relationally and collaboratively adopted in this purpose are: (1) member checks as reflexive; (2) critical reflexivity of self; and (3) redefinition of the status quo. Member checks as reflexive refers to the constant backward and forward confirmation between the researcher and the participants under study in regard to re/constructions of constructions of the participants. Reflexive member checking seeks to illuminate a better representation of the lived experience of the participants being studied. Critical reflexivity of self should be played out in a way that challenges the researcher to be able to come across something unknown as they move on.

In other words, the researcher should openly express how his or her own subjectivity has progressively been challenged and thus transformed as he or she collaboratively interacts with his or her participants. Lastly, in regard to the major outcome of the report/account, participants should be able to differently perceive and impact the world in which they live. Recently, Denzin's (2000) performance ethnographic validity is indicative of this redefinition of the status quo, in which 'readers...move through the re-created experience with the performer' (p. 905) to be able to differently perceive the world in which we live and to actively engage themselves in changing this world. At the center of this changed world making is the notion of emancipation,<sup>2</sup> that participants are willing to deconstruct what has been taken for granted in a systematic, change focused way (Anderson, 1989; Anderson and Herr, 1999; Dillard, 2003; Gitlin, 1994; Lather, 1986, 1993, 1998, 2001; Lenzo, 1995; Wasley, 1993).



## *A holistic view of validity in qualitative research*

Our understanding of validity attempts to remedy the common mistake expressed by Maxwell (1996: 88):

Many proposal writers make the mistake of talking about validity only in general, theoretical terms presenting abstract strategies such as bracketing, member checks, and triangulation that will supposedly protect their studies from invalidity ... [these terms and techniques are] magical charms that are intended to drive away evil.

We agree with Maxwell's argument in its fullness, knowing concepts such as bracketing, member checks, and triangulation do not necessarily mean that, through employment, the researcher is endowed with God's magic stick. These concepts or theories do not function like the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), ensuring validity if used. As noted earlier, to some researchers, it is a myth to believe in one-to-one correspondence between what has actually happened and the reconstructed texts. Conducting these methods from the side of the researcher has little to do with the guarantee of the report's credibility or validity.

Our conception, however, does not preclude the use of transactional validity techniques. In fact, we have used member checks, triangulation, bracketing, and other transactional processes in our own work. We continue to assert that member checking can be a necessary but never sufficient condition. We are, however, acknowledging that these are not viewed as magical charms of assurance.

Instead, as seen in Figure 1, we are proposing an inclusive discourse of validity in qualitative research by reflecting on what matters specific to the problem/research within our research purview. Our emphasis is on both theory and practice. Trustworthiness criteria, when they advantage the research, researched, and production of the account, should by all means be utilized. Our distinction is that it is not an either/or choice. One need not choose between practical and emancipatory purposes any more than one must select transactional validity criteria over transformational validity aims. Transformational approaches seeking ameliorative change can and should be combined, when deemed relevant by the researcher(s) and/or participants, with more traditional trustworthiness-like criteria.

Our view values a recursive, open process in qualitative inquiry and gives us an analytic tool by which to identify a comparative, operational, methodological relationship among the research purposes, questions, and processes.<sup>3</sup> It is open not only to the bricolage of a variety of validity approaches, but is open to the bridging of purposes outlined by Donmoyer (2001, described earlier). We would like to use this newly construed meaning of validity, in an operational sense, in conjunction with relevant and particular concerns of validity. Further, our conception considers the evolving nature of new purposes, yet to be imagined re/presentations, and a fluidity that accepts rather than rejects/separates.



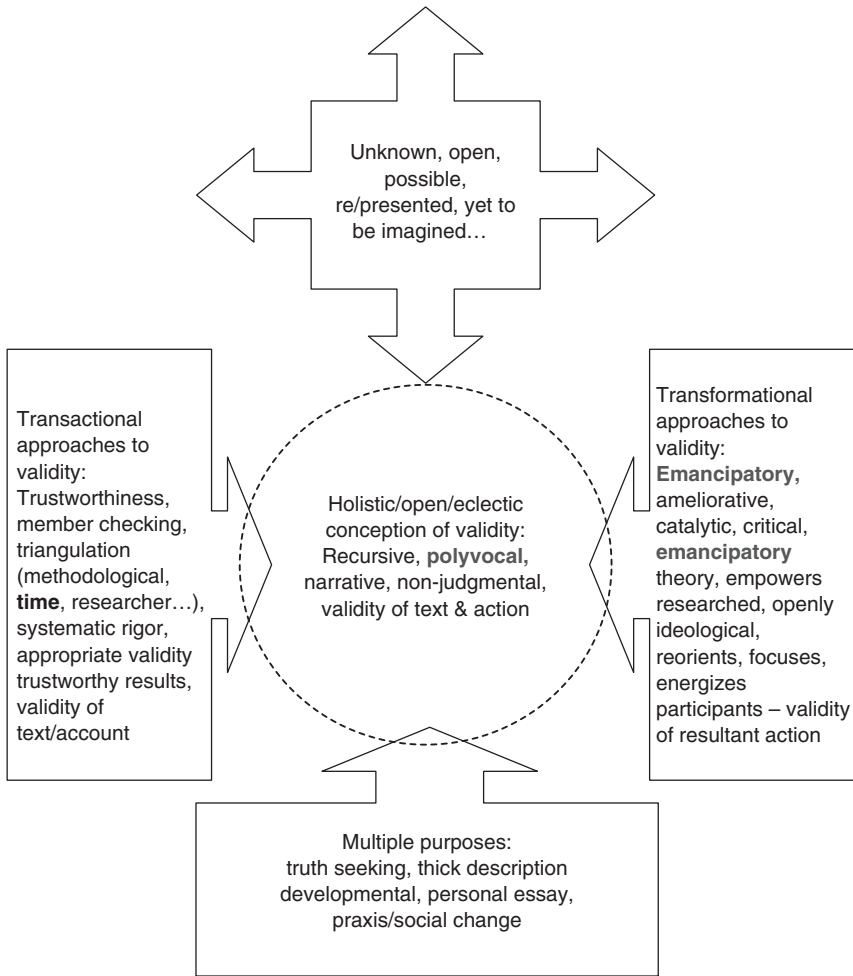


FIGURE 1. *An alternative framework for understanding validity in qualitative research*

On this note, we support narrative constructions that make overt the validity approaches incorporated and why. This is comparable to Wolcott’s (1990: 129) ‘letting the readers “see” for themselves,’ but relates to validity as opposed to data exemplars. Informants in a research process that values a recursive validity are involved throughout the inquiry, not just during often brief data collection and even more cursory member checks, and their perspectives are valued both seriously and over time. Even then, the emphasis, in our opinion, is on the explication of researcher moves, thoughts, and theories. Thus, we put great emphasis on the way the researcher needs to actually perform in practice. In our proposed framework, we differentiate among types of member checks, i.e. ‘technical (focus on accuracy, truth),’ ‘ongoing (sustained

over time, multiple researcher/informant contacts),’ and ‘reflexive (collaborative, open-ended, reflective, critical),’ all of which are meaningfully compatible with particular research purposes, questions, and processes.

We are not asserting a construction of validity that separates ‘good’ research from ‘bad.’ Scheurich (1996) eloquently noted the fallacy of approaches that try to do so, including those approaches that claim to be more contemporary, open, progressive. Scheurich calls these ‘successor validity’ modes (p. 3). Creating binaries or bifurcations of any sort is counterproductive and creates a false sense of difference. Perhaps, says Scheurich, ‘we (I) ought to be stunned into silence’ (p. 10). In doing so, we open up validity considerations to the consumers of the research. Munby (1983) has argued that in doing so, usefulness and validity concerns become directly connected to those in the setting, and therefore cannot be determined solely by the researcher.

## *Conclusion*

Many are interested in creating new senses of validity in qualitative research. Some hope that validity methods and strategies in qualitative research can be defined to the extent that they are equal to those of conventional or quantitative research methods. We believe this to be a misguided aim. We add that a variety of purposeful approaches (e.g. thick description and praxis/social change) may be combined to obtain holistically ‘valid’ results. This is not to say, however, that the designs are the same or employ the same approaches, methods, or techniques associated with validity. We seek a working definition of validity that is flexible, useful, and supported by a broad array of qualitative researchers for its balance between what Richardson (1997) has called substance and variety. But, we also seek a validity framework that readily touts the credibility of qualitative research so that those outside the field can understand the benefits we have and will continue to reap from multiple qualitative inquiry methods. Our alternative framework is presented to begin the social construction of this holistic view of validity in qualitative inquiry.

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### NOTES

1. Member checking is one of many strategies to involve participants in the research process. Nonetheless, it needs to be understood in two distinctive ways. One is a way of seeing it as a technique or method in making the research valid for those pursuing the ‘truth’ seeking purpose. In this regard, member checking is conceived of as

a means to an end. The other is a way of taking its fundamental social initiative into consideration. As Fine et al. (2000) assert, the researcher should:

write on the ethics of responsibilities because we don't want to write only for and with friends; we hope to write in ways that contribute to a reshaping of the 'common sense' about poverty, the economy, and the social and human relations. We consider, then, the ethics of writing research in the interest of social justice.... (p. 125)

Therefore, the process of member checking is in and of itself considered a purposeful social invitation in which the participants, especially people living at the margin of society, determine the images of themselves that they wish to become public, nominate the realities that they and only they can construct, and engage in ever-higher levels of participation in the social inquiries that shape their lives. In the table the authors create, the praxis/social change purpose fits into this notion of member checking as an active social initiative. Besides this major difference between the 'truth' seeking and the praxis/social change purposes, the nature and use of member checking varies and should be differently applied in action as research unfolds.

2. The notion of emancipation can be differently interpreted to different researchers in terms of the connotation of praxis/social change. As with the broad sense of critical theory tradition that includes, but is not limited to, Marx, critical ethnography, or feminist tradition, the meaning of praxis/social change is discursive in exploring the false consciousness of those under study. In other words, assisting the participants to reawaken such a false consciousness toward the world in which we live is the mission that the researchers have, the mission that completes 'praxis' (putting thought into action). On the other hand, for those who try to help participants identify fundamental problems that have been seen as dysfunctional in an organization, the meaning of social change should not necessarily be directly related to social theories alluded to earlier, but be more practical or deliberative in pursuing praxis, that is, it is argued that praxis can seriously occur as long as the researcher and the participant work together over time, independent of a predetermined goal like emancipation.
3. We think our emphasis on theory and practice is pragmatic in bridging the transactional and transformational frameworks set forth in this article. We find ourselves acknowledging the fact that Hammersley's (1998) position, called 'subtle realism,' in regard to validity provides a similiarity. He notes, 'while retaining the idea that true knowledge corresponds in relevant respects to the phenomena that we seek to represent, this view recognizes that we can never be absolutely certain about the validity of any knowledge claim; but it suggests that we can still make reasonable judgments about the likely validity of such claims' (p. 78). We agree, to a large extent, with his position, both philosophically and methodologically. The important difference lies in the fact that we attempt to make research purposes, questions, and processes aligned with an interactive, procedural approach to validity.

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