PEARLS, PITH, AND PROVOCATION

Evaluating Interpretive Inquiry: Reviewing the Validity Debate and Opening the Dialogue

Maureen Jane Angen

Designing and carrying out effective and valid research are the desired goals of all researchers, and demonstrating the trustworthiness of one's dissertation research is a requirement for all doctoral candidates. For qualitative researchers, reaching the desired goal and meeting the requirement of trustworthiness become particularly problematic due to the considerable debate about what it means to do valid research in the field of qualitative inquiry. This article reviews the various approaches to the validity problem in the hope of turning this debate into a dialogue. Validity is traced from its origins in the realist ontology and foundational epistemology of quantitative inquiry to its reformulations within the lifeworld ontology and nonfoundationalism of interpretive human inquiry. Various recent qualitative approaches to validity are considered, and interpretive reconfigurations of validity are reviewed. Interpretive approaches to validity are synthesized as ethical and substantive procedures of validation.

Until recently in the social sciences, the issue of how we arrive at valid knowledge has involved a debate between the proponents of quantitative procedures and those who preferred a qualitative approach. For a time, qualitative methods were accepted only as an exploratory approach to inquiry that required further validation by quantitative methods (Leininger, 1992). Presently, there seems to be at least tacit agreement that some aspects of human experience cannot be understood through reductionistic measures (Giorgio, 1992; Mishler, 1990). The major debate now hinges on the issue of validity. Proponents of positivist quantitative research regularly imply that qualitative, especially interpretivist, approaches to human inquiry are so rife with threats to validity that they are of no scientific value. In the debate over legitimacy, the validity of qualitative research findings has become "the most controversial issue" (Bailey, 1997, p. 21). This article reviews the various approaches to the problem of validity in the hope of turning this debate into a dialogue, and it traces validity from its origins in the realist ontology and foundational

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epistemology of quantitative inquiry to its reformulations within the lifeworld ontology and nonfoundationalism of interpretive human inquiry. Various recent qualitative approaches to validity are considered, and interpretive reconfigurations of validity are reviewed.

Validity in quantitative approaches to research relies on rigorous adherence to methodological rules and standards. When these same rules are applied to qualitative approaches, difficulties arise. When judged by the validity criteria of experimental procedures, interpretive work is viewed as being too subjective, lacking in rigor, and/or being unscientific and, consequently, denied legitimacy (Mishler, 1990). Until the research community has settled on some shared understandings of what it means to do good interpretive research, quantitative approaches will continue to be perceived as better science and, therefore, as more legitimate.

Qualitative researchers have made numerous and varied attempts to resolve this quandary, ranging between the extremes of directly adopting quantitative criteria for validity to disregarding validity as an issue in qualitative approaches to research (Silverman, 1993). These poles represent differing underlying assumptions: There are those who advocate the adoption of positivist criteria and hold to (at least a subtle form of) the realist ontology and foundational epistemology on which positivist science is based, and there are those who are more steeped in the postmodern, interpretivist assumptions of a nonfoundationalist epistemology and tend toward releasing research from the stranglehold of *validity as truth*. The latter strive to find a way to claim legitimacy and trustworthiness without the necessity of laying claim to uncontested certainty. Based on these assumptions, qualitative research may be divided into two camps: those with more positivist leanings and those labeled as *interpretivist* who attempt to legitimate their research without bowing to the authority of positivism.

It should be noted from the outset that divisions made between positivist and interpretivist qualitative traditions are somewhat artificial. In fact, the interpretivist label is often used to encompass all qualitative methods, including those that retain significant positivist assumptions. Qualitative research may also be referred to in the literature as naturalistic, emergent, interpretive, phenomenological, hermeneutic, critical, or ideological (Bailey, 1997). Some of these labels are used generically, but they may also be used to denote specific research perspectives along with ethnography, case study, grounded theory, and discourse analysis (Mishler, 1990). This overlap in categories is partly responsible for the ongoing debate about the issue of validity in qualitative research. For some approaches, positivist methodological criteria remain a valuable way of assessing validity, but for interpretivist approaches, the underlying assumptions preclude using method-based criteria and require a more appropriate reformulation of validity (Smith, 1990). Again, these categories do not divide neatly along the lines of specific methodological approaches or even across different publications of the same author (e.g., compare Denzin, 1989 and Denzin, 1997).

Coming from an interpretive perspective, Smith (1984) suggests that it is time we “dispense with the traditionalist ideas of objectivity and truth and realize that we are ‘beyond method’” (p. 390). Methodological criteria, no matter how rigorously applied to qualitative work, will not produce the objectivity desired by positivist researchers (Jardine, 1990; Sandelowski, 1993). Yet, the desire for legitimacy in an academic world that is still tied to positivism keeps interpretive researchers questing for a recipe or map that will legitimize their efforts. As researchers, we want to be assured that we have done the right thing. We want to claim that because we have made all the right moves, we have procured *the truth*. However, life as we live it is not static enough to allow for this kind of certainty: It is much more fluid, contextual, and relational (Jardine, 1990; Lincoln, 1990). If we pay attention to the lifeworld, the realm of our everyday experiences, we will become more attuned to the myriad influences that impinge on human thought, speech, and action and see that we can no longer strive for some unitary truth of human behavior using exclusively reductive, positivist procedures. Instead, what we require is an interpretive approach to social inquiry that will enlarge and deepen our understanding of what it means to be human in this more-than-human realm. To do this is to risk certainty, but this loss is mitigated by what we stand to gain in moral and practical relevance. As researchers, we remain ethically culpable, both for doing justice to the topics we take up and for choosing topics that have something meaningful to say about how we carry on from here. Yet the question remains, “What does it mean to do good qualitative research?” We require a sense of what a good qualitative study entails if we are to pursue our own research in a way that merits the consideration of others. We need to be capable of articulating that sense to defend our work against those who would consider it merely subjective opinion or philosophical ruminating and therefore unscientific or unscholarly.

To trace recent attempts to answer the question of what distinguishes good qualitative studies from bad ones, I will begin with a review of the assumptions and views of validity derived from the predominant Western notion of realism and move toward the more interpretive approaches based in an understanding of lived reality. Using ontological and epistemical assumptions as the basis for categorizing the various approaches to the validity quandary is neither to deny the continuities that exist between categories nor to ignore that many researchers straddle these neat divisions; rather, it is done to bring some sense of order to the growing and complex body of material on the topic. The latter part of this article raises the specter of relativism and then looks closely at how interpretive researchers have reconfigured validity to better fit with interpretive assumptions and goals and how these reconfigurations depend on the qualities and abilities of the researcher.

REALISM AND THE INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGE

Positivist Realism

The ground of positivist science lies in a correspondence theory of knowledge and a realist ontology (McCarl-Nielsen, 1990). This view posits a real world of objects apart from a human knower who can use language and symbols to accurately describe and explain the truth of this objective reality. The origin of this realist orientation is usually credited to Descartes, but in fact, it can be traced back as far as Galileo, who stated that “whatever cannot be measured and quantified is not scientific” (Capra, 1989, p. 133). Knowledge, according to realist assumptions, must be attained through an objective distance from the world, and if this distance is not maintained, there is a risk of tainting reality with our own subjective beliefs and biases (Heshusius, 1994).

Given the present emphasis on multiple realities constructed through social discourse, this realist ontology tends to be considered rather simplistic and is sometimes labeled *naive realism* (Kolakowski, 1993). However, understood within the historical context of its development, realism was a progressive step toward liberating human understanding from the stranglehold of traditional sources of authority in medieval myths and religion (Capra, 1983). The purpose behind Descartes's neat division of reality into thinking beings and material objects was to provide an unequivocal answer to the epistemological question. By positing a reality separate from our knowledge of it, he provided something against which we can compare our claims and thereby ascertain truth. The Cartesian split between the subjective thinker and the objective world was then married to Francis Bacon's passion for the prediction and control of nature, and the resulting scientism became its own unassailable authority. These notions have culminated in a canonical empirical science based on a number of unstated, often unconscious, assumptions (McCarl-Nielsen, 1990).

Other Positivist Assumptions

Aside from the basic assumption of an objective reality separate from the subjective knower, natural science relies on a presupposition of empirical verification, that is, the notion that we can rely on our sensory perception of the world to provide us with accurate data. Natural science also assumes that there are general laws or patterns of cause and effect that, once discovered, may be used as the basis for predicting and controlling natural phenomena. This belief in the deterministic nature of the universe has motivated positivistic science for several centuries. There has been an abiding faith that a rational and objective approach, guided by the appropriate procedures, would ultimately enable us to predict and control events for the benefit of humankind. Natural science has also been assumed to be a value-free endeavor, and strict methodological procedures were developed to keep the taint of subjective bias, prejudice, and tradition from distorting the purity of the results (Bernstein, 1985). The proper procedures applied in a methodical manner with the proper objectivity culminates in the clear and unequivocal truth (Jardine, 1994). Thus, positivism became the authoritative voice of cool, objective reason, with experimental methods being the only legitimate route to valid scientific knowledge. All those wishing to share in the authority of science had to subscribe to the scientific method (McCarl-Nielsen, 1990; Mishler, 1990).

Positivist Validity

Validity within the experimental approach relies very heavily on method to ensure the adequate distance between the subjective biases of the researcher and the object of the study. The natural science approach dictates that method is the only route to clear and distinct knowledge; therefore, anything that cannot be rendered clearly through method must be ignored as unreliable (Jardine, 1994). The reliability of the experiment (its repeatability) and the capacity for generalizing the results to other circumstances or populations team up with valid methodology in positivist approaches to ensure the truth value of research efforts. Validity, reliability, and generalizability have been called the "holy trinity" of the natural sciences (Kvale, 1996), and the judgment based on this trinity has become the definitive test of all research (Lather, 1994). Madison (1988) describes the use of method for verification in science as follows:

> Having [learned the method], one only has to apply it to whatever subject matter one chooses; the only criterion in applying the method is "correctness" of application. . . . One's guide is the method itself, not the subject matter to which it is applied. (p. 28)

Grounded in a representational epistemology, positivist researchers depend on an external, foundational, ahistorical reality to which all knowledge claims can be compared and judged. Because interpretivism has rejected this foundational basis of knowledge, judging the validity of an interpretive study becomes problematic. Some argue that rejecting objectivity as defined by positivism leads to a multivocal reality in which the issue of criteria for judging the validity of an interpretation is nonexistent (Woolcot, 1990). Others have argued that if we fully reject naive realist foundationalism, we are in danger of embracing a nihilistic relativism that would render all research useless (Silverman, 1993). Consequently, many researchers have subscribed to a subtle form of realism on which to build a valid research practice and have developed criteria that closely parallel those used in quantitative approaches.

SUBTLE REALISM

A major approach to addressing the validity problem in qualitative research has been to adopt a position that Hammersley (1995) calls "subtle realism." Hammersley agrees with the realists that there is a reality independent of our knowledge of it, yet he also contends, along with the interpretivists, that we can only know reality from our own perspective in it. For this latter reason, he redefines validity as *confidence* rather than *certainty* and posits a number of methodological criteria that should allow us to judge the degree of confidence we might place in an interpretive study. Along with these specific criteria, he suggests that the plausibility, relevance, and importance of the topic be considered in the evaluation of a study.

Silverman (1993) also uses subtle realism, seeing it as the only approach that allows us to develop any confidence in qualitative work, and he posits a number of specific procedures aimed at increasing the validity of qualitative research. These procedures include careful case selection, ongoing hypothesis testing, inductive analysis, and quantifying through counting. Reliability can be addressed, he believes, by using standardized methods for taking down field notes and transcribing taped interviews and by having peers review the data analysis. Altheide and Johnson (1994) argue against what they call an "antifunctionalist position" and adopt an approach that they call "analytic realism" (p. 487). They claim that their position, like Hammersley's (1995) subtle realism, provides a necessary foundation for validity claims. Similarly, Wakefield (1995) argues for a "humble realism" (p. 17), and Maxwell (1992) argues for a "critical realism" (p. 283).

Using Specific Criteria

Many other researchers are less explicit about their acceptance of a foundationalist position for validating their work but belie their stance in the use of specific criteria. An excellent recent example is Creswell (1998), who refuses to adopt quantitative terminology but "attempts to find qualitative equivalents that parallel quantitative approaches to validity" (p. 197). He outlines eight specific techniques, at least two of which, he believes, must be employed in any valid study. His criteria include prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer review or debriefing, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checks, thick description, and external audits. Researchers working from a more interpretive perspective do engage in some of these practices, particularly prolonged engagement, thick description, and the consideration of alternative perspectives (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995). However, many interpretive researchers argue that assessing validity through specific methodological criteria continues the positivist assumption of an external foundational reality, untainted by our subjective involvement, to which research results can be compared and judged for their truth-value.

Problems With the Use of Specific Criteria

Member checking. The process of returning analyses to informants for the confirmation of accuracy, termed *member checking* or *respondent validation*, is criticized for relying on the foundational assumption of a fixed truth or reality against which the account can be measured (Sandelowski, 1993). Morse (1994) argues that this process may only lead to confusion rather than confirmation because participants may have changed their minds about the issue. The experience of the interview process itself may have made an impact on their original assessment, or new experiences may have intervened. Respondents may disagree with the researcher's interpretation, and then, the question of whose interpretation should stand arises. From a nonfoundationalist perspective, there is no universal fixed reality, and because understanding is cocreated through dialogue and experience, there is no static truth to which the results of an interview can be compared.

Reflexivity. Interpretive researchers also consider the issue of clarifying researcher bias or self-reflexivity to be a misguided attempt to obtain some objective distance between the self and the work being undertaken (Heshusius, 1994). From an interpretive perspective, if the inquirer is not separate from the subject of inquiry, there is no way to obtain that optimal distance that would allow the truth to show itself (Smith, 1984). Although reflexivity is still important to the process, it is undertaken in interpretive research to value the researcher's own contribution to the understanding and to trace how the researcher's original sense of the topic changes over the course of the research (Bergum, 1991). Self-reflexivity is not carried out to create an objectivity with which to more fully address the topic (Gadamer, 1994). Lather (1993) points out that the latter would be an impossibility given the fact that there is much "that eludes the self-present subject" (p. 685). Interpretive research depends on the intersubjective creation of meaning and understanding.

Triangulation. This procedure has been labeled after the technique in surveying that allows accurate convergence on a point using measurements from three different angles. The assumption in research is that multiple methods, investigators, and/or data sources will result in convergent meanings about the topic under inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). This strategy has come to be viewed as problematic by many interpretive researchers because it loses the context through which alternative meanings are derived, and as with member checking, it assumes some underlying objective reality to be converged upon (Silverman, 1993). Mathison (1988) argues that triangulation is as likely to result in inconsistent or contradictory evidence as in convergent findings. Although they are critical of triangulation as a required criteria leading to a univocal truth, many interpretive researchers consider it useful in some cases to elicit divergent accounts of a phenomenon (for extensive arguments, see Denzin, 1994; Mathison, 1988; Silverman, 1993).

Peer review. This approach to validating research is also not recommended by interpretive researchers. Morse (1994) contends that a researcher’s peers can never have the same involvement with the information as the principal investigator. Because they have less direct involvement, they will have less ability to judge whether the interpretations made have given adequate consideration to all perspectives. However, they can help by assessing whether the investigator has argued cogently and written persuasively.

Nielsen (1995) argues that the adoption of positivist criteria such as those described above is “in danger of making qualitative research into bad quantitative research” (p. 8). These criteria are put forward to enhance the rigor of the work and to avoid what is viewed as a dangerous slide into relativism. The problem lies in the tendency to undermine the assumptions on which interpretive work is predicated (Smith, 1990). If interpretive researchers reject foundationalism, even in its subtle forms, are they courting relativism?

EXORCISING THE SPECTER OF RELATIVISM

Behind the desire to retain some sense of foundationalism lurks the fear of relativism (Maxwell, 1992). The argument goes as follows: Without positing some objective reality, there will be no way to arbitrate between contending viewpoints, and without an objective measurement of validity, all viewpoints are equally valid; therefore, rather than doing research, we may as well simply defend our favorite opinions and beliefs. However, for the interpretivist, the midpoint between solipsistic relativism and hard-nosed realism lies in the lifeworld. The world of our lived experience, the lifeworld, is the very ground from which all understanding grows; what we know is always negotiated within the culturally informed relationships and experiences, the talk and text, of our everyday lives. An interpretivist approach is attuned to the dialogical context of human understanding, arguing that we cannot step outside of our intersubjective involvement with the lifeworld and into some mythical, all-knowing, and neutral standpoint anymore than we can give up our responsibility for taking a stand and adopt a solipsistic position. By our very being in the world, we are already morally implicated. Our values and beliefs will show themselves in our actions whether we stop to think about them or not. We do not live in the world as if nothing mattered, as if everything was relative; rather, we live in constant meaningful interaction with people and things, continually, if not consciously, making practical and ethical choices about how to act and interact.

INTERPRETIVE ASSUMPTIONS AND NEW DIRECTIONS FOR VALIDITY

Interpretive Assumptions

At the turn of the century, Dilthey questioned the use of natural scientific methods to study human phenomenon (Madison, 1988). He argued that the reductive simplification required for experimentation and causal explanation is inappropriate to the goals of understanding and interpretation required for the study of human experience. A knowledge limited by the methods of natural science, Dilthey believed, could not serve the purposes of a human science. His work gave rise to an ongoing debate and to an interpretive approach to knowledge deemed by many to be more adequate for the study of human beings (Bernstein, 1985). Interpretive researchers assume that reality as we can know it is construed intrasubjectively and intersubjectively through the meanings and understandings garnered from our social world. There can be no understanding without interpretation. We are always embedded in the lifeworld of language and sociohistorical understanding without recourse to some outside point of view, or Archimedean standpoint, from which to gain objectivity on a world that is external to us (Haraway, 1988; Johnson, 1987).

The acceptance of human understanding as sociohistorically embedded and "enlanguaged" leads to the assumptions that all interpretations are temporal, located, and therefore always open to reinterpretation and that the truth of an interpretation must continually be negotiated through continuous conversation and dialogue (Kvale, 1996). Because we cannot separate ourselves from what we know, our subjectivity is an integral part of our understanding of ourselves, of others, and of the world around us. Consequently, the researcher's values are inherent to all phases of the inquiry process (Creswell, 1998), and moral soundness becomes the basis for judging interpretive work. These assumptions lead to both an openness in methodology, in which the methods used should emerge from the inquirer's evolving understanding, and to a written account that relies heavily on a persuasive literary style (Mishler, 1990).

Philosophically, interpretivism does not concern itself with considerations of realism beyond how we experience it in our everyday lives. Rather than engage in debates about whether there is a brute foundation that we can know or whether all our experiences are merely subjective, interpretivism grounds itself in the phenomenological understanding that we carry out our lives in an intersubjective realm that we experience sensually and know linguistically from moment to moment and day to day (Mugerauer, 1989). We live as if the world exists apart from us, but we only know it and understand it through our attempts to meaningfully interpret it, and those attempts at interpretation are in turn influenced by our temporal and cultural location (Gadamer, 1994). Understanding, therefore, cannot be separated from context. Interpretive research is predicated on the desire for a deeper understanding of how humans experience the lifeworld through language, local and historical situations, and the intersubjective actions of the people involved (Moss, 1994).

Interpretive Understandings of Validity

As Madison (1988) contends, "The life-world transcends, or precedes, all objectivist as well as subjectivist categories" (p. 44). Consequently, interpretive understandings of truth differ from the correspondence theory of truth to which the positivist concept of validity subscribes and avoid the solipsistic relativism of a purely subjective view. Truth, from an interpretive perspective, is no longer based on a one-to-one correspondence to objective reality. It is acknowledged that what we can know of reality is socially constructed through our intersubjective experiences within the lived world, which results in a form of truth that is negotiated through dialogue. Kvale (1996) notes that "valid knowledge claims emerge as conflicting interpretations and action possibilities are discussed and negotiated among the members of a community" (p. 239). The social discourses we are engaged in, through our past and present interactions with the world around us, constantly inform and reformulate our understandings, our interpretations, and our claims to knowing. Viewing knowledge claims and truth as negotiable features have lead to an understanding that the scientific method itself "is inherently less distinguishable from other ways of knowing than previously thought" (McCarl-Nielsen, 1990, p. 4). Science, like all forms of knowing, is also socially constructed. It is as dependent on the beliefs and values of scientists as it is on the strict adherence to abstract methods and measurement (e.g., see Kuhn, 1970). In Madison's (1988) words, "The 'objective' world of science is but an interpretation of the world of our immediate experience" (p. 44).

As philosophers of science began to consider seriously the interpretive nature of all scientific endeavors and the normative issues raised by research in general, the notion of validity also began to change. Some authors (Haraway, 1988; Unger, 1992) have argued that an interpretive perspective requires a reformulation of the present scientific understandings of rationality, objectivity, and validity into understandings that are more appropriate to how we live our lives and how we conduct research. Rationality, from a human science perspective, becomes the logic of intelligible human experience and action based in our "thoughtful and conversational relation with the world" (van Manen, 1990, p. 10). Colaizzi (1978) has suggested that objectivity from an interpretive perspective is having "fidelity to phenomena" (p. 52), a faithfulness necessarily inclusive of our own experience and the experiences of others. Objectivity redefined as fidelity, according to Blumenfeld-Jones (1995), "dialectically conjoins notions of objective truth . . . and subjective interpretation" (p. 26). Such reformulations suggest that positivist criteria should be viewed "as *particular* [italics added] ways of warranting validity claims" rather than continuing to be privileged "as universal, abstract guarantors of truth" (Moss, 1994, p. 10).

From an interpretive perspective, pragmatic and moral concerns become paramount considerations for evaluating all science, whereas methodology and specific criteria recede into the background (Kvale, 1996; Unger, 1992). Haslanger (1993) contends that the pretense of neutrality in positivism has legitimized a morally irresponsible position that, especially when applied in the social sciences, denies our humanity. It is now generally conceded that neutrality and impartiality are impossible standards to attain and that all knowing is perspectival knowing and therefore partial and open to reinterpretation (Haraway, 1988). Does this mean that we are left with no help in distinguishing between a good piece of research and a compelling statement from an ideologue? The answer to this question lies in a radical reformulation of validity and an understanding that, as human beings, we are never free from the responsibility of making choices.

How carefully the research question is pondered and framed, how respectfully the inquiry is carried out, how persuasively the arguments are developed in the written account, and how widely the results are disseminated become much more important issues than any criteria-based process of accounting that occurs after the research is completed. Validity from an interpretive perspective becomes a moral question that must be addressed from the inception of the research endeavor to its completion (Creswell, 1998; Kvale, 1996). Rather than demarcating truth from falsehood, validity must be located within the discourse of the research community, and judgments must rely more on the moral and practical underpinnings of the inquiry than on methodological criteria (Mishler, 1990). As researchers, we are always beholden to the decisions that we make about what is valuable and useful enough to study and what would be the best way to go about studying it. As Caputo (1987) contends, an interpretive stance "inspires trepidation about all of our schemes and compassion for all of us who must in any case take action" (p. 259). We are never saved from the human condition, which requires continuous decision making about how we carry on in the world, by methodology.

RECONFIGURING VALIDITY FOR INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH

Validity is presently being reconfigured in ways that are more appropriate to the epistemological assumptions and goals of the lifeworld ontology in which interpretive research is rooted. Because the use of specific procedures is no longer viewed as a guarantee against the taint of subjective bias, interpretive reformulations of validity are less about normative methodological criteria and abstract procedural rules and more about broad principles that must be carefully considered in each specific instance. Smith (1984) contends that, due to the nonfoundational nature of interpretive inquiry, only "indeterminate procedures" or "characterizing traits" can be developed to describe "what one might do" rather than "mandate what one must do" to increase the validity of the work (p. 384).

Interpretive researchers using a nonfoundationalist epistemology have made varied attempts at reformulating validity using a bewildering barrage of new terms. I have summarized these attempts under two broad headings, Ethical Validation and Substantive Validation. In addition, I have considered the ways in which these new configurations of validity depend on qualities inherent to the researcher. The term *validation* rather than *validity* is used deliberately to emphasize the way in which a judgment of the trustworthiness or goodness of a piece of research is a continuous process occurring within a community of researchers (this follows the example of Mishler, 1990). Maintaining an antifoundational stance on epistemology implies the need for an ongoing open dialogue on the topic of what makes interpretive research worthy of our trust (Lather, 1993; Madison, 1988; McCarl-Nielsen, 1990); thus, the considerations of validation described here are not definitive, neither in the sense of being the final word on the topic (Lather, 1994) nor in the sense that every interpretive study should be required to address them all (Smith, 1984).

Ethical Validation

Smith (1990) argues that human inquiry from an interpretive stance becomes more of an ethical issue than an epistemological one. Because value-free science is considered an impossibility, all research agendas must be questioned as to their underlying moral assumptions (Fiumara, 1990). All scientific endeavors should contribute to our ability to carry on in an ethical way; interpretive human science inquiry in particular becomes a moral issue, with its aim of more fully understanding the meanings involved in our everyday existence. Interpretive research should provide a thoughtful, caring, and responsible answer to the question, "How do we become more fully who we are?" as human beings (van Manen, 1990).

Our choice of method itself has political and ethical implications (Lather, 1993; Mishler, 1990; Moss, 1996). Frank (1992) and Kleinman (1992) argue that the move to detach oneself from the lived world through positivist objective practices is to shun our human moral responsibility and that only an interpretive approach to research can provide the thoughtfulness and care required to study the human condition. In a similar vein, Heshusius (1994) calls for ethically grounding our validation of research in a sense of our shared humanity; and Kvale (1996) contends that beneficence should be the most basic guideline informing our research agendas and practice. Others (Haraway, 1988; Lather, 1986a) have argued that interpretive approaches are ethically required to promote an equitable context within which all voices may be heard and that we must "continuously struggle to be conscious of how our work responds to (or neglects) difference and ambiguity" (Flax, 1990, p. 43). These latter notions echo the fairness criterion suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1989). In a more radical vein, Caputo (1987) suggests that we must "do everything we can to see to it that the debate is fair, that no one's voice is excluded or demeaned, and that the vested interests of the powerful, who usually end up having their way, are restrained" (p. 260).

Aside from choosing approaches that will allow us to remain connected to our shared humanity and to serve our diversity well, claims to valid interpretations are inextricable from issues of usefulness. Ethical validation requires research to provide some practical answers to the so-what question. As Cherryholmes (1988) asserts, "clear-cut distinctions among social research, social theory, and social practice cannot be sustained" (p. 421). Because the questions we ask relate directly to the answers we find, our choice of topic and approach must be pragmatically informed from the outset if there is to be practical lifeworld value in our research efforts (Peshkin, 1993). Interpretive research, because it is not divorced from real-life contexts, is perhaps better situated to inform practice than most quantitative approaches (Sandelowski, 1996). It should be noted that, in some ways, the pragmatic validation of an inquiry is beyond the purview of the individual researcher, that is, in the sense that the practical value of a piece of research unfolds into the future as the interpretation is taken up by the community of practitioners (Madison, 1988).

Interpretive inquiry also plays an ethical role in moving us beyond our present understanding of a given topic to some new, more generative understanding (Gadamer, 1994). We should know and respect the ethical and substantive traditions of good qualitative research and then creatively combine our own experiences with the inquiry process to produce valuable new interpretations (Sanjek, 1990). A good piece of research needs to have generative promise (Peshkin, 1993); it should be fertile and raise new possibilities, open up new questions, and stimulate new dialogue (Gadamer, 1994); it should reveal greater "horizons of meaning" (Madison, 1988, p. 15). Lather (1993) uses the labels *rhizomatic* and *voluptuous* validity to describe the capacity for the work to engender new connections and go beyond what is given. Without productively and creatively going beyond simple representation, the work becomes lifeless. In Gadamer's (1994) words, a study that "regarded understanding as reconstructing the original would be no more than handing on a dead meaning" (p. 167). We should allow our creative thought and imagination to engage with our careful study of the research topic, opening ourselves to the meanings that are called forth (Morgan, 1983). At the same time, this movement must be humble (Lather, 1992). It should not be an attempt to close down on some new truth or to be the final word on the topic; rather, it should provide an invitation to continue the conversation and to take the dialogue in new and more fruitful directions (Mishler, 1990; Nielsen, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Beyond the need for practical value and generative promise, another form of ethical validation lies in the ability of a research study to transform our actions. As Morgan (1983) notes, this form of validation "lies not in abstract explanation or interpretive understanding, though these might indeed be relevant, but in the action capacities and effectiveness of change that the research creates" (p. 399). The transformative value of inquiry has also been labeled *catalytic*, *educative*, *empowering*, *liberating*, or *transgressive* and is often associated with critical or openly ideological approaches to interpretive research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lather, 1986b, 1993; Morgan, 1983). At the very least, this form of validation implies that the researcher should take care to avoid the alienating role of "privileged possessor of expert knowledge" and suggests a more cooperative approach between the researcher and the researched (Lather, 1986a, p. 72). Transformative validation implies a number of ways in which interpretive research might disrupt received notions of how research is formulated, carried out, and written up. Lather (1993) calls this ironic or "paralogic" validity, that is, a resistance to prevailing authoritative regimes. Examples include becoming an advocate for the research participants during the data-gathering process (e.g., see Davies, 1993; Howe & Eisenhart, 1990) or fluidly positioning oneself in a reflexive manner within the written text as a transgressive self (see Lenzo, 1995). Both of these examples push the boundaries of the objective, closed, authoritative stance that is required of positivist researchers and often visited upon interpretive researchers.

Ethical validation requires that we provide practical, generative, possibly transformative, and hopefully nondogmatic answers to the questions we pose as researchers (Eisener, 1990; McCarl-Nielsen, 1990; van Manen, 1990). Unger (1992) suggests that we ask if the research is helpful to the target population, if there are alternative explanations than the ones settled on, and if we are more sensitized to, or enlightened about, the human condition because of the research. Along with these ethical issues, a number of substantive issues arise in considering the trustworthiness or goodness of an interpretive study.

Substantive Validation

Having ruled out methodology as the basis for validity, the substance of the inquiry becomes an important focus for evaluating an interpretive piece of research. As Gadamer (1994) said, "Coming to an understanding . . . is always coming to an understanding about *something* [italics added]" (p. 180). Researchers must show how they have done justice to the complexity of their chosen topic by bringing into play all the various, present and historical, intersubjective understandings of it (van Manen, 1990). This process includes a consideration of one's own understandings of the topic, understandings derived from other sources, and an accounting of this process in the written record of the study.

Subjective prejudices, rather than being viewed as a distortion of reality and thereby a threat to be guarded against, become the background from which all further understanding springs forth (Gadamer, 1994; Smith, 1984). As the research topic is engaged, the sociohistorically embedded researcher interacts with the subject matter to cocreate the interpretations derived (Gillet, 1995). This implies a commitment to self-reflexivity, wherein the researcher's position requires a vigilant self-critical reflection (Alcoff, 1994). This is not to say that the researcher's prejudgments should be the sole focus of the research or called up to be set aside; rather, self-reflection contributes significantly to the substantive validation of the work as the necessary precondition of all further understanding. Understandings derived from previous research on the topic also confer substance to the inquiry, as do those derived from popular culture and from contact with people who have had experience with the topic. The seeking of disconfirming cases and conflicting understandings (Morgan, 1983; Morse, 1994) and the careful consideration of the language we use to communicate our cultural understanding of the topic (Gadamer, 1994) both lend substance to the research. Accounts of how self-reflectivity, prior research, and popular and personal understandings affect the prejudgments of the researcher also increase the substantive validation of the work (Nielsen, 1995; Sanjek, 1990).

Interpretive research is a chain of interpretations that must be documented in order for others to judge the trustworthiness of the meanings arrived at in the end (Nielsen, 1995). Therefore, the written account of the research must provide evidence of the thoroughness and comprehensiveness of the understandings used to form the resulting interpretations (Madison, 1988). This substantive approach should allow the researcher to face criticisms of subjectivity—of this being just their opinion or even just the opinion of their participants—with evidence of what has been brought to bear on the interpretation. Sanjek (1990) calls this "theoretical candor," elucidating one's "critical, political and theoretical awareness" and making explicit how later understandings "confirm, extend or revise" the theories with which one began (p. 396). This documentation of conceptual development provides evidence of how the conclusions were reached (Morse, 1994).

These considerations imply that validation through substantive procedures, like ethical validation, must be carefully thought out from the inception to the completion of the inquiry process, from assessing one's biases in the early stages through considering how they are changed by one's engagement with the topic to giving a written account in the final product. A substantive approach to validation indicates the need to keep a written record of one's own transformations throughout the process (Bergum, 1991). There must be an intelligibility and a coherence to these connections so that the reader may judge the trustworthiness of the arguments made (Madison, 1988). This requirement of intelligibility speaks to how substantive validation depends to a large degree on the audience's felt sense of whether the work is a worthwhile interpretation. The coherence and comprehensibility of the written piece will impact on the reader's understanding, and the text must go beyond intelligibility to evoke an immediate feeling of authenticity, a smile of recognition, or an aha experience, which Nielsen (1995) calls the text's "spontaneous validity" (p. 5). Written accounts of research, therefore, must resonate with their intended audience; they must be compelling, powerful, and convincing (Eisener, 1988; Osborne, 1990; Smith, 1984; van Manen, 1990). The audience must be able to recognize a familiarity or sense of kinship within the work (Jardine, 1994). The written account must provide a sense of "intuitive self-evidence" (Von Eckartsberg, 1983, p. 200) beyond what is commonly revealed about the topic, a feat that requires considerable literary ability in the researcher. All of the painstaking and creative attention to detail suggested by both the ethical and substantive reformulations of validity puts a heavy burden on the shoulders of the interpretive researcher.

The Qualities of the Researcher

New configurations of validation depend in many ways on the characteristics and abilities of the researcher. In Morse's (1994) judgment, the quality of the research will only be as good as the researcher who engages in it. She and others (see especially McCarl-Nielsen, 1990) have described the characteristics required of a good researcher, which, for example, include good people skills; resilience, patience, and persistence in the face of ambiguity and slow progress; and versatility, flexibility, and meticulousness in carrying out the details of the project. The skills of being a creative and persuasive writer are also required, as is the need to be passionately involved in the topic. The researcher in the interpretive approach is the instrument through which the topic is revealed. This requires researchers to have an intense personal involvement in the process (Sanjek, 1990) and an ability to minimize the distance between the self and others (Creswell, 1998), an involvement and intimacy that must be tempered by a view of how differences influence and add to the growing understanding of the topic.

Interpretive researchers have been described as craftspersons (Kvale, 1996; Mishler, 1990). From this perspective, they require a period of apprenticeship that involves the study of the art of interpretive research using exemplary models and experiential training and practice. Similar to Gadamer (1994), Madison (1988) argues that the responsibility of the researcher is paramount in the development of a valid interpretation because there is no specific method that will save the researcher from having to choose how to proceed. This speaks to the required moral integrity of the researcher (Smith, 1990). As noted earlier, we have a human moral obligation to take up topics of practical value, and we must do everything in our power to do them justice.

SOME TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

In interpretive inquiry, there is no choice but to be responsible for choosing, and much of the craft of the inquiry process lies on the shoulders of the person conducting the investigation. As investigators, we are responsible for choosing topics that have practical value; our research should be both relevant and beneficial to those concerned. The complexity of human experience and our shared humanity must figure in to our questions, our investigative processes, and, ultimately, our answers. Our own location must be carefully considered and clearly explained. The work we do should be made visible, both in the sense of providing substantive documentation and in the sense that we must publish our efforts or the work amounts to nothing. Our conclusions should always provide new possibilities and remain open to alternate or more expansive interpretations.

This reformulation of validity as ethical and substantive processes of validation may have some researchers envisioning the wolves of relativism howling at our door. As Caputo (1987) contends, "Although there is no way to get rid of the wolves (exposure to such perils is part of the human condition) there is no reason we need to be consumed by them" (p. 209). Although we can never be certain of anything in the realm of human affairs and action, still "we can have legitimate grounds for believing that some things are clearly better than others" (Madison, 1988, p. 35). I have suggested that although the notion of validity as truth or certainty must be abandoned, we can reformulate it as a process of validation, an evaluation of trustworthiness taking place within a human community. The dictionary definitions of *valid* and *validation* support this reformulation: valid is defined as something that is supported by convincing and sound evidence, and validation is defined as the process of confirmation (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989). The etymological root of valid is the Latin word *valere*, which means to be well, strong, powerful, or effective and to have worth or value. Thus, validity does not need to be about attaining positivist objective truth, it lies more in a subjective, human estimation of what it means to have done something well, having made an effort that is worthy of trust and written up convincingly. Doing effective interpretive research requires that we do something meaningful that furthers our understanding and stimulates us to more informed and, hopefully, more humane thought and action. In our capacity as researchers or in putting research into practice, we are never absolved of the ongoing responsibility to decide what is worthy of our attention.

Validation, rather than *validity*, more aptly expresses the process of intersubjective agreement that is brought to bear in evaluating interpretive research in this postfoundationalist world we inhabit. The issue has become much broader than ensuring a valid correspondence to some fixed, external truth through specific criteria. The basis for evaluating the quality or trustworthiness of a study becomes an "open-ended, always evolving, enumeration of possibilities that can be constantly modified through practice" and disseminated through exemplary models (Smith, 1990, p. 178; see Mishler, 1990). Viewing the problem of validity in this way, it becomes the same problem that we face in our daily lives. The same negotiation, acceptance of ambiguity, and reliance on dialogue that are required in all our myriad daily interpretations of meaning are also required for the validation of research. In addition, as in the daily interpretations that we make, our research conclusions remain open to continued reinterpretation (Eisener, 1990; Lather, 1993; Nielsen, 1995; Smith, 1990; Unger, 1992). Likewise, this article is but one attempt to summarize and extend the conversation about what makes good interpretive research worthy of that judgment, and it too remains open to reinterpretation. Because our research experiences are "created and legitimized by institutionalized vocabularies and practices" (Unger, 1992, p. 161), I invite others to continue this conversation.

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Maureen Jane Angen is a Killam postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Calgary. The fellowship supports her research on the effectiveness of the Alberta Cancer Board's Tapestry Retreat Program, a residential psychosocial support program for people living with cancer. She recently completed an interpretive inquiry titled The Paradox of Living Well with a Life-Threatening Cancer Diagnosis *for her doctoral dissertation.*