
Article

Symposium Conclusion - Issues of Validity: Behavioral Concepts, Their Derivation and Interpretation

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Abstract

Qualitative inquiry that commences with the concept, rather than the phenomenon itself, is subject to violating the tenet of induction, thus is exposed to particular threats of invalidity. In this symposium, using the examples of the concepts of uncertainty, trust, vulnerability and suffering, and interview and videotaped data, we discuss strategies to maintain the inductive thrust, and hence validity, during data analysis. The authors present the use of a skeletal framework and scaffold as techniques to “frame” the concept, while, at the same time, continuing to further develop the concept.

Keywords: Concept development, qualitative validity, induction, video analysis, scaffold, skeletal framework, trust, uncertainty, vulnerability, suffering

Conclusions

Consistently adhering to the dictum of induction forces each qualitative project to begin at the descriptive level, and disallows qualitative results to incrementally build on the foundation of previous research. We agree that the risks of commencing qualitative inquiry with a concept, rather than from data, are considerable, and this step must be taken cautiously. However, constantly forcing qualitative inquiry to commence from the level of description impedes the advancement of inquiry, in particular of theory development.

Some possible solutions to this quandary are suggested in this set of articles. For concepts that have a solid descriptive base, the investigator may elect to continue inquiry inductively, but "jump start" the research by using prior work as a skeletal framework (and building up from solid or minimal characteristics) or a scaffold (and working within established boundaries). A *skeletal framework* is defined as characteristics identified from previous inquiry that provides an internal structure that provides a starting point for observations and interview questions, and for analysis. The researcher proceeds by building on these structures or categories, padding then out or 'giving them flesh' and organizing the ways they fit together.

A *scaffold*, on the other hand, is the boundaries of the concept, or the delimiters that mark what is or is not an example of the concept. Of course, in many cases the boundaries are not a clear cut line, but rather the boundaries merge with allied concepts as attributes are shared or characteristics are weak, but enough information is known to make the distinction about what is and is not an example of the concept. In this way, the scaffold delineates the concept, without making any assumptions about the interior attributes or characteristics, thus enabling inductive exploration of the internal compositions of the concept to take shape. Therefore, both of these strategies enable inquiry to take place, building data analysis inductively—the skeleton from the core of some of the characteristics, and the scaffold within the perimeters of the concept.

Providing examples of the use of these inductive strategies, Spiers describes how 'pink elephants' may derail inquiry and interfere with validity. Hupcey describes how she first deconstructs and assesses the level of development of the concept of trust. She then constructed a skeletal framework, incrementally utilizing projects conducted with different participants in different clinical settings. Penrod illustrates how she systematically deconstructed uncertainty, and then fleshed out a skeletal framework to refine the concept and used phenomenology to further develop the concept. Threats to validity, in particular conceptual tunnel visions, were avoided. Finally she disentangles other concepts within the experience of uncertainty, using concept correction.

Analysis of videotaped data and issues of validity that occur when interpreting video as sole source data, are discussed by Morse and Pooler. Using a model of suffering developed from previous inquiry as a scaffold, these authors discuss styles of interpretation from video data: Detailed descriptions (but with minimal inferences), inferences extending from shared meaning and theoretical inference, and the threats to validity that extend from each of these styles. Using a model of suffering developed from previous works as a scaffold, Morse and Pooler illustrate how the scaffold directs inquiry facilitating the identification of behavioral patterns among family members in the trauma resuscitation room—a new participant population.

These examples illustrate pragmatically how inductive processes may be maintained during analysis, how threats to validity may be avoided, and how new data may be added to create rich, significant and generalizable concepts. Thus inquiry proceeds validly and systematically.

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