

1. Describe how one can enhance the potential validity (internal and external) of a qualitative research project throughout the research process; that is, in (a) creating a research design; (b) analyzing your data; and (c) writing up your findings.
2. Discuss the processes and steps involved in setting up and conducting qualitative fieldwork with regard to issues such as site selection, gaining access, entering the field, observations & interviewing, field notes, and leaving the field.

Question 3

M. A. COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS – QUALITATIVE QUESTION 1

In basic social scientific inquiry, validity is “the match between a construct, or the way a researcher conceptualizes the idea in a conceptual definition, and a measure. It refers to how well an idea of reality ‘fits’ with actual reality” (Neuman, 2004, p. 115). To phrase it more simply, validity is when a social science research design is measuring what it actually purports to measure. In quantitative research methods, validity is usually ascertained through calculating the variables numerically—for example, measuring the variable “age” through number of years the respondent has been alive. In qualitative research, while equally as important, validity is significantly more complicated because qualitative research strives more for authenticity than for trying to quantify some abstract concept. By authenticity, what is meant is “a fair, honest, and balanced account of social life from the viewpoint of someone who lives it everyday” (Neuman, 2004, p. 120). Instead of trying to match the results of a study to some kind of “objective” truth, the qualitative researcher is focused on making sure that the truth of the community or content being studied is accurately portrayed from their own perspectives.

The distinction should be made between internal and external validity. Internal validity refers to “the degree to which descriptive or causal inferences from a given set of cases are correct for those cases” (Brady & Collier, 2010, p. 334). In other words, internal validity means that all variables in the research design are accurately measured and not conflated or confused with one another. External validity, by contrast, refers to “the degree to which descriptive or causal inferences for a given set of cases can be generalized to other cases” (Brady & Collier, 2010, p. 330). External validity assesses how valid, or accurate, a study and its variables are in comparison to the design and findings of other studies. Both external and internal validity are significant in designing, analyzing, and writing up qualitative research.

M. A. COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS – QUALITATIVE QUESTION 2

Beginning with creating the research design, one important concept to understand is construct validity, which refers to “the match between the meaning intended by the researcher and the meaning assumed by the respondent” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 71). In conducting social inquiry, it is important not only that the researcher understands the community she or he is studying—their customs, languages, norms, etc.—but also that the people in the community understand the questions and ideas the researcher is attempting to communicate. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) give an example of one researcher who wished to study women’s voting behaviors but found that the women he interviewed responded to his questions either with laughter or silence. When a female researcher intervened, she found that the women the male researcher interviewed were flabbergasted by the question of whether or not they were afraid of walking into a voting booth, to which one interviewee responded: “Whatever in the world would make me afraid of a voting booth? Of course I’m not afraid, but how do you answer a question like that?” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 71). This is one example of how the theoretical bridge between a researcher and his or her community of study can be interrupted: precision of language degrades to the point where the study participants do not understand the question being asked. Ensuring construct validity can greatly increase internal validity by ensuring the researcher asks questions that not only address the issues the researcher wishes to uncover but also

For external validity in research design, one important aspect of the research design is the formulation of a research question. While the term “hypothesis” may not be appropriate to all kinds of qualitative research, since ethnography is one research method for which hypotheses are not always appropriate due to their exploratory natures (Van Maanen, 1988), modern ethnography has taken the direction of “understanding sociocultural problems and using these

understandings to bring about positive change in communities, institutions, or groups” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 6). As problem-oriented qualitative research has become more common, the research question inquires about some issue within a community or institution. External validity can be ascertained through the degree by which this research question is falsifiable, which is “the potential of a claim, hypothesis, or theory to be proven wrong” (Brady & Collier, 2010, p. 330). Falsifiability is important because for any conclusion to be externally valid and able to be critiqued there has to be potential for it to be refuted by varying evidence. A falsifiable research question increases external validity because it makes the research question more exact and more replicable for other researchers who wish also to test a particular study’s design and conclusions.

Data analysis is another step in the research process during which internal validity is paramount. Oftentimes, qualitative research is criticized as being too subjective in comparison to statistical testing (Neuman, 2004). One way to mitigate this subjectivity is to have multiple researchers coding the same data. Hesse-Biber (2017) recommends to “have two researchers from your project [...] use your code categories to code the same interview and then compare the extent to which their coding of interviews was in agreement with your coding of the data” (p. 327). Having multiple coders analyze the same data will more clearly demonstrate whether or not the coding categories measure what they purport to measure. If multiple researchers agree on a category placement, the measure is probably valid; if multiple researchers do not reach an agreement on such grounds, the instrument may not be valid and thus may need readjusting. In either event, the project’s internal validity will be reinforced with multiple researchers analyzing the same data and reaching their own conclusions before settling on collective ones.

M. A. COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS – QUALITATIVE QUESTION 4

External validity during data analysis is mostly done through examining how other researchers have analyzed qualitative data in a similar community or content area. Looking at how other scholars have categorized, codified, and analyzed data in a similar peer-reviewed study can give an idea of what one's own data may look like when organized. An example of this is in Orsini's (2015) content analysis of heroin and cocaine in major news stories. To analyze the data, Orsini used a coding instrument similar to that used by Hughes, Spicer, Lancaster, Matthew-Simmons, and Dillon (2010) in another study on illicit drugs conducted in Australia. While it is not always necessary to use a coding instrument similar to what other researchers have used, examining the instruments other scholars have used in similar research and assessing the validity of their measurements is an effective way to make sure one's own operationalizations of codes and variables match with designations set by previous scholars (Hesse-Biber, 2017). It can help to ensure consistency and accuracy in a way one researcher alone may not have been able to.

The write-up is the step in the research process during which the researcher must organize the data into a cohesive narrative that is intuitive to the reader and indicates the significance of the findings—in other words, make sense of all of the data collected. In qualitative research, a study is generally understood to contain external validity if the results are generalizable, meaning that the results of the study can be applied to a greater population (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Generalizability in qualitative research is a complicated issue because, while it can increase external validity, many qualitative researchers reject the need for generalizing results, with one scholar claiming academics should be wary of generalization:

Generalization [...] as part of a professional discourse of “objectivity” and expertise, it is obviously a language of power. On the one hand, it is the language of those who seem to stand apart from and outside of what they are describing [...] On the other hand, even if we withhold judgment on how closely the social sciences can be associated with the

apparatuses of management, we have to recognize how all professionalized discourses by nature assert hierarchy. (Abu-Lughod, 2014[1991], p. 394).

Generalization, as covered in the discussion of research design, is an effective measure of external validity because it means “the results can be generalized to many situations and many groups of people” (Neuman, 2004, p. 121), a goal for which many researchers strive. As discourse around generalization in qualitative research has grown, however, external validity in terms of the write-up has become less important than the responsibility of the researcher to portray the community as authentically as possible in the write-up (Van Maanen, 1988).

Internal validity in the final write-up can be assessed by comparing the results of one’s own study to studies done by researchers in similar communities. Hesse-Biber states that “validity takes the form of subjecting one’s findings to competing claims and interpretations and providing the reader with strong arguments for your particular knowledge claim” (2017, p. 60). Each new published piece of research should be a novel contribution to the extant literature on the topic, meaning one’s own claims may contradict someone else’s findings. This does not mean that one’s own findings must contradict the current literature by necessity, but the degree to which one’s own findings are similar or different in the final write-up can be an indicator of consistency within one’s own work. Van Maanen (1988) refers to this as “epistemological stunts to be performed on the ethnographic highwire” (p. 49), wherein the qualitative researcher must remain consistent but also truthful to the community’s perspective in the final write-up of the field research results.

Validity is a complex issue in qualitative research. Internal validity tends to take priority because, as qualitative researchers are interested more in gaining greater insight into a particular community, event, or content than they are in applying findings to some greater population. Both kinds of validity are still important in qualitative inquiry, however, and I have outlined here

M. A. COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS – QUALITATIVE QUESTION 6

some ways to ensure external as well as internal validity through the research process, including the design, the analysis, and the write-up.

Question 4

In conducting qualitative fieldwork, the first step one must complete is selecting the appropriate field site. There are numerous factors to consider when selecting a field site. Hesse-Biber (2017) recommends asking the questions: “Can you conduct research in this setting? How accessible is the site to you as a researcher? Have you considered practical research issues with regard to a given site selection, such as how expensive it will be to conduct research in this setting?” (p. 188). As knowledge of fieldwork has evolved through the years, factors relevant to the identity of the researcher, such as age, race, and gender have come to be known as enablers and inhibitors in field site access. Hesse-Biber (2017) gives the example of a sociologist who wished to gain access to inner city cocaine culture, a difficult population to assess, but his statuses as a man of color and as a former prison teacher made accessing the community easier than it may have otherwise been. Another determination the researcher must make is “how the group will be bounded and who is included in it” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 111). In an increasingly globalized and connected world, setting boundaries for a field site is difficult and sometimes impossible or even arbitrary, so determining the boundaries of the field site or indeed if the site has observable boundaries is important. Finally, in selecting the field site, the researcher must ascertain “whether or not the proposed study group contains or exemplifies a sufficient number of members with the characteristics of interest to the researcher” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 111). This is most prominent in cases where the research question is determined before the community of study; if the community is of more interest to the researcher initially in perhaps a problem-oriented fieldwork approach, this consideration may not be relevant.

Gaining access to the community is a significant step in the research process. First and foremost, the researcher “must gain the permission of the Institutional Review Board (IRB)” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 189). Maintaining good research ethics should be at the forefront of any researcher’s mind, so gaining permission through the appropriate channels to study a particular community is the first step. In terms of gaining access to the research participants, sometimes researchers already have personal or professional contact or ties in the particular field site. At other times, it may be appropriate to go undercover, which is when “the participants in the setting do not know the researcher’s identity or intent” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 195). In most cases, however, it will be necessary to build rapport with an informant, or what some people call “cultural experts” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 86). Cultural experts are usually chosen “because they are quite knowledgeable about their own culture (and are also able and willing to communicate with [researchers])” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 86). An informant or a cultural expert can be critical not only in helping the researcher access the field but also in helping the researcher understand what he or she observes, such as specific customs or jargon special to the community with which the researcher may not have previously been familiar. If the researcher gains the trust of an informant, it is likely the community in which the researcher has expressed interest will be more comfortable being studied (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Van Maanen, 1989).

Once access to the field is negotiated, the next step is to actually enter the field. In entering a field site, it is fairly common that it becomes necessary for the researcher to gain the permission of a gatekeeper, or “people who control access to information or to the research site itself” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 176). Formal gatekeepers are most common to encounter first, as they “grant you formal permission to enter a setting for the purpose of conducting

research” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 191) and usually hold some formal position of power. Informal gatekeepers are equally as important, though, as they “hold key positions in the informal culture or subculture you are studying” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 191) and may be anybody at the field site, even “the thug on the corner” (Neuman, 2004, p. 282). Negotiating with gatekeepers is an important part of entering the field, as it can set the tone for the entire study. For example, in a prison study, “prisoners may not be cooperative if they know that the prison warden gave approval to the researcher” (Neuman, 2004, p. 282). The researcher must be mindful of the relationships within the community, how different people respond to different actions, and how best to navigate the community to answer the research questions and ascertain the community’s truth as they live it (Hesse-Biber, 2017; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Van Maanen, 1988).

In conducting observations, the researcher must choose an observer perspective appropriate to the specific study. One is the complete observer, in which “the researcher’s identity must remain hidden; the researcher does not interact with those in the setting” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 193). In this instance, the researcher can observe the field without initiating any interruption to the field site’s social flow, but the researcher also cannot interact with the participants and clarify certain concepts with which she or he may be unfamiliar (Hesse-Biber, 2017). By contrast, the complete participant is one who goes undercover and “actively engages with members of the setting” while fully participating in all activities in the field (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 195). This carries with it the burden of being unable to reveal one’s self as a researcher and having to deceive participants, leading to a potential moral dilemma (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The observer as participant and participant as observer roles offer an in-between way to do observations: the observer as participant reveals his or her identity to the participants but contact is relatively limited; and the participant as observer reveals his or her identity to the participants

and participates in the research setting to a fair degree (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Conducting observations is never a universally standard experience, but the qualitative field researcher should choose a participant-observer role among the ones listed here that is most appropriate to her or his field site, community, and questions being asked.

As far as interviews go, they should be informed by a topical and well-informed interview guide, “questions that the researcher brings to the interview” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 114). While the interview is always very specific to the community and to the research question, interviewers should always ask the following questions about their guides: “is the guide clear and readable? Does the guide cover all of the topical areas you are interested in? Are there any topical areas or general questions missing from the guide?” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 115). The point of an in-depth interview is to create a conversation between the researcher and the participant so the latter can tell a community story in her or his own words (Hesse-Biber, 2017). As such, it is critical that the researcher build rapport with the interviewee—“participants must feel safe, comfortable, and valued. In order to accomplish this, researchers need to take the role of active listeners while the interviewee is speaking” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 117). The researcher must do everything she or he can to make the participant feel at ease opening up about community experiences. In-depth interviews are critical to fieldwork, as they give more information on certain aspects of community life, personal histories and events, and cultural knowledge (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). In selecting who to interview, the researcher may employ a purposive sampling technique, in which participants are chosen based on the research question and their appropriateness therein, or they can use a convenience sample in which anyone in the community willing to participate can be contacted—a technique frequently used in special or hard-to-reach populations (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

The significance of field notes cannot be understated because they are what connect the researcher back to what she or he experienced at the field site. In recording field notes, the appropriate method will depend on the particular research goals. The most common method is to use descriptive field notes, which is generally “writing about one’s experiences and observations deriving from intense and involved participation” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, p. 5). This is a field notes technique in which the researcher attempts to vividly describe their perceptions of social life as they observe it within that particular community. Descriptive field notes always vary from researcher to researcher, as while multiple researchers can attend the same event, “each [participate] in a different fashion, and these different modes of involvement lead to subtle, but significant, differences in how they [write] about what occurred” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, p. 12). Thus, while total objectivity is impossible, it is important for the researcher to be as detailed and accurate as possible so as to lead to a rich and layered write-up. One final note to be made about field notes is that they should be written as contemporaneously as possible; in other words, “it is critical to document closely these subtle processes of learning and resocialization as they occur” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, p. 17). If the researcher waits too long to document events at the field site, memories of the events may become distorted or deleted from the researcher’s mind altogether, so contemporaneous field notes mitigates this danger (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

The final step in qualitative fieldwork is leaving the field. The exact time during which it is appropriate to leave the field varies from study to study, but usually researchers cease qualitative fieldwork when they reach theoretical saturation, or “where you are no longer finding new information in the setting” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 200). This is an indication that the researcher has learned all she or he can learn and that her or his presence on this field site is no

longer appropriate; at that point, it is time to leave the field and analyze the data. On that note, there are some exit strategies that can be employed. One is to “depart abruptly, severing all ties to that setting” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 201). Researchers sometimes do this if they are uneasy with the interactions they have had in the community, but this is not recommended, as it could cause people in the community emotional discomfort or distress (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Another way to do this is “preemptively informing members of the setting that your stay is only temporary” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 201), giving participants notice that you will not be around permanently and allowing them to prepare for your departure. Other exit strategies can be useful, too, such as a public declaration of one’s intent to leave, such as a going-away party, giving participants closure and a chance to say good-bye if they wish (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

Site selection, community access, entering the field, noting observations, conducting interviews, recording field notes, and leaving the field are all important steps in qualitative fieldwork. In this paper, I have detailed those steps, defined them, and outlined the best means by which to go about doing them. While all qualitative field work studies are different, this should give a sense of how to go about conducting one very generally.

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