Rigor in Qualitative Research - by: Maryann Abendroth, PhD, RN

Scholars vary in their determination of criteria for scientific rigor / integrity in qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006). Rigor in this type of research is based frequently on Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) established evaluative criteria for qualitative research. The term trustworthiness is used in place of rigor, and it includes the evaluative criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

The criterion of credibility parallels to internal validity in the quantitative world. Employing strategies that enhance credibility ensure that research results are believable from participants' perspectives. Several strategies exist to illustrate credibility. For example, researchers can use the strategy of prolonged engagement, which is the investment of sufficient time to learn the culture of a research environment. Likewise, they build trust with research participants, which can be accomplished through the extensive interview process. Peer debriefing, another strategy to build credibility, is a formal or informal discussion with professional peers to help clarify aspects of a project that may otherwise remain implicit in the researcher's mind. An example of this strategy can be working jointly with a qualitative data analysis group that includes researchers from different and complementary disciplines. Finally, member checking is yet another way to establish credibility. Researchers use this strategy when they check their interpretation of the data with feedback from research participants. This activity can occur at the end of an interview or during informal meetings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). These are just a few of the many strategies used to strengthen credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The criterion of transferability can be thought of as parallel to external validity/generalizability. Transferability refers to the degree that results may be applied to other settings. A way to achieve this in the qualitative world is to provide a thick description (i.e. very detailed description) of the data. Providing such a description can facilitate transferability of judgments in one study to other situations and environments in other qualitative studies (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). For example, transferability can be achieved in a study of caregivers of persons with chronic illness by thoroughly exploring their context of caregiving; however, other researchers who wish to transfer such perspectives to other contexts would still need to make their own judgments about the sensibility of the transfer (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

The criterion of dependability can be akin to the quantitative term, reliability, which focuses on the accuracy of data over time. One of the strategies that can enhance dependability is to use a code - recode technique. This activity involves coding a segment of the data and then redoing that coding procedure in two weeks to determine if similar results are achieved (Kreftin, 1991). Another way to ensure dependability is to document in detail the research design, and all the processes within the research study, in order to allow future researchers to repeat the work. Such in depth exploration allows for the evaluation of proper research practices (Shenton, 2004).

Finally, the criterion of confirmability refers to the degree to which research results can be confirmed by others. This criterion is parallel to objectivity in the quantitative realm of research. Similar to objectivity, the goal of confirmability is to assure that the interpretation of the data is rooted in the phenomenon at hand and not based on a fabrication or influence of the researcher’s experience or imagination (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). One of the strategies used to achieve confirmability is using a reflexive journal (Anney, 2014). Such reflexive analysis can be used to identify whether researchers are aware of their influence on the data (Kreftin, 1991). Another important strategy to support
Confirmability in a qualitative study is to employ audit trails completed by someone external to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such audits are an in-depth examination of the research process that includes data collection and analysis. This detailed examination allows readers to see how data and constructs emerged by tracing the course of the research process. Such trails can be represented by diagrams (Shenton, 1991).

Qualitative methods are often used in holistic nursing research. Being aware of the evaluative criteria that enhances trustworthiness (i.e. rigor) in holistic nursing research will maintain our high standards of inquiry.

References