

# A Discussion of Validity in Qualitative Research

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# A Discussion of Validity

- Setting the scene
- The type of data
- Validity - a valid concept!
- About validity
- Re-use of data
- Archiving qualitative data
- Valid documentation -  
documenting validity?

# The Scene

- Data archiving - looking back
  - hand in hand with numbers, columns & rows
- Characteristic of the DDA
  - experts, well established practises, competence

# Comments on the type of data under consideration

- Quantitative data

- hard
- objective
- rigorous

- e.g. *survey scheme*

- one IP, one scheme  
data as numbers  
data as a well defined unit

- Qualitative data

- soft
- subjective
- speculative

- e.g. *interview session*

- one IP, multiple  
components  
data as words and  
impressions  
data as an ambiguous unit

# From data to findings

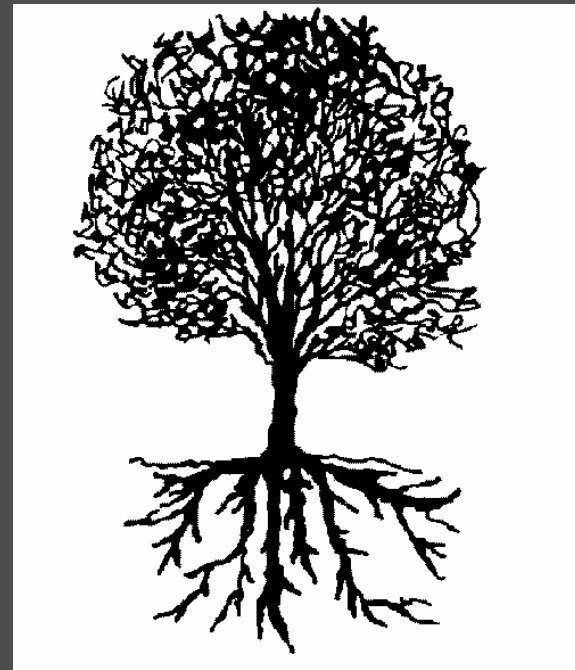
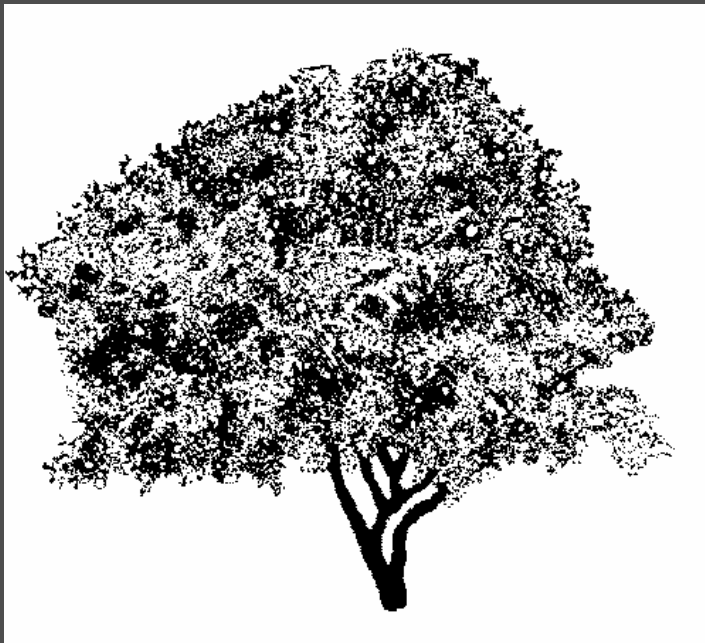
## Quantitative methods

- Collection of survey data
  - Analysis based on numeric data by using statistical tools
  - Findings as tables, graphics and coefficients
- **Characteristics:**  
transparency, step by step, documented, testable, machine readable ...

## Qualitative methods

- Collection of various information components
  - Analysis based on words by using interpretation techniques and gut feeling
  - Findings as ‘understandings’
- **Characteristics:**  
ambiguity, verbal argumentation, hermeneutical interpretation process, tangled documentation, ...

# A conceptualisation



# Validity - a valid concept!

- Neglect
- Rejection
- But...
- If researchers wish to demonstrate why we should believe them, they must be concerned about validity!
- And many are...

# The grounds

- Data is not considered to be an exact representation of the social reality, but a social construction, interpretable in multiple ways
- *“The quest for absolute knowledge is replaced by a conception of defensible knowledge claims” (Kvale, 1996)*

# A definition of validity

- Traditionally:
  - *Validity is that we are measuring what we want to measure.*
- In a broader sense
  - *Validity is that we are observing what we want to observe.*

# In this light validation is...

- **Craftsmanship** performed by the researcher
  - i.e. based on checking, questioning and theorising
- **Communication** of the knowledge generated
  - i.e. based on a knowledge discourse
- **Taking action** on the knowledge generated
  - i.e. based on pragmatism

# Craftsmanship

The objective is to find sources causing invalidity

- To check
  - act the devil's advocate, continuous checks for credibility and plausibility, analyse sources for potential biases
- To question
  - ask *what?* & *why?* & *how?*, test of false statements
- To theorise
  - evaluate the theoretical conception of the observed

# Communication

- Valid knowledge is constituted when conflicting knowledge claims are argued in a dialogue.
- Valid observation is decided through the argumentation of the participants in a discourse.
- This is rejecting that all claims are equally valid (as it is sometimes argued by ‘postmodernists’)

# Action

- *“Action speaks louder than words!”*
- Pragmatic validation rests on observations and interpretations with a commitment to act on the interpretations.
- Two types of pragmatic validation
  - is a statement by an IP accompanied by action?
  - will the researcher’s knowledge instigate behavioural changes?

# Re-use of data

- The researcher re-using data must be able to validate the data material
- This implies a need for:
  - Systematic assessment of the relationship between *what* was observed and *how* it was accomplished.
  - Acquaintance with the knowledge discourse the findings/the report was placed within
  - Idea of the consequences of the report

# Validating 'by craftsmanship'

- The re-user must be able to conceptualise and evaluate every step of the research process (data production)
- Some generic topics for a report based on qualitative findings (Altheide & Johnson, 1994), which could be assigned to documentation in an archival context:

# "Generic topics"

- The context - *history, physical setting, and environment*
- Number of participants & key individuals
- Activities
- Schedules, temporal order
- Division of labour
- Routines and variations
- Significant events - *their origins and consequences*
- Members' perspective and meanings
- Social rules and basic pattern of order
- ... etc.

# Validating 'through communication'

- Access to information related to the data material provided by the archive:
  - link(s) to the publication(s) by the primary researcher
  - links to publication based on secondary analysis (if any)
  - links/references to material the primary researcher has defined as related to the data material
  - links/references to information the archivist sees as related
  - links to related quantitative material in the archive or elsewhere
  - e-mail addresses to all relevant individuals & institutions

# Validating 'by consequences'

- Internally (IP)...
  - The re-user makes a thorough reading of the data material to see, if the IP's seem to act according to their statements (related to validation by craftsmanship)
- Externally (publication)...
  - The primary researcher could be requested to comment upon what he/she expects will be the consequences of the findings/the report
  - If possible a summary of factual consequences provided by the primary researcher (preferably) or the archive

# Valid documentation - documenting validity?

- NO, documenting validity is the researcher's responsibility!
- BUT...
  - by raising the question of validity in the context of obtaining and disseminating qualitative data we can position ourselves as an active partner in the field
  - by monitoring the dialogue within the research community we can act according to the needs of researchers