

Critical Validities: A Framework for Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Much has been written about the role, definition, measurement and enactment of validity in qualitative research, including seminal works that opine on the appropriateness of perspectives on validity with respect to the nature of qualitative research and frameworks that provide criteria to measure different types of validity. I argue that in conjunction with this previous work, qualitative research would also benefit from a tool that emphasizes the critical aspects, or lack thereof, in any particular work. Many of the structures and systems in which we operate uphold power dynamics to some degree that are worth examining as we, researchers in education, conduct research about phenomena, groups, individuals, behaviors, practices and beliefs that exist within these structures and systems. I refer to this tool as a set of critical validities that include contextual, reflexive, interrogative, inclusive, and transformative validity.

Keywords

qualitative methods, validity, critical research, education

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Introduction

Much has been written about the role, definition, measurement and enactment of validity in qualitative research. Seminal works such as Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Merriam (1998) have pondered the appropriateness of perspectives on validity with respect to the nature of qualitative research. Others have put forth validity frameworks for different types of qualitative research. For example, Maxwell (1992) enumerates five types of understanding and validity – descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, generalizability, and evaluative – as well as their philosophical and practical dimensions. Lather (1993) defines the idea of transgressive validity through a check-list of ironic, paralogical, rhizomatic, and voluptuous validity. Anderson and Herr's (1999) five evaluative criteria for action research including outcome, process, catalytic, democratic, and dialogic validity. In addition to frameworks, literature on qualitative research methods identifies strategies to enhance validity such as audit trails, triangulation, external audits, member checking, thick descriptions, peer review, and more (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2020).

These frameworks and strategies offer rich means for researchers to conceptualize aspects of their research, but I argue that in conjunction with these tools, qualitative research would also benefit from a tool that emphasizes the critical aspects, or lack thereof, in any particular work. In fact, now more than ever, in an era of coded language that euphemistically covers up oppression, attempts to reverse diversity, equity and inclusion work, and works to spread misinformation and fear, a refined set of validities that focuses on critical dimensions for qualitative research is necessary.

To construct this tool, I start with Creswell and Miller's (2000) definition of validity based on Schwandt (1997): "In this discussion we define validity as how accurately the account represents participants' realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them" (p. 124). The authors also note with credit to Hammersley et al. (1983) that "Throughout this discussion, we make the assumption that validity refers not to the data but to the inferences drawn from them" (p. 125). I argue that many of the structures and systems in which we operate uphold power dynamics to some degree that are worth examining as we, researchers in education, conduct research about phenomena, groups, individuals, behaviors, practices and beliefs that exist within these structures and systems. Therefore, I believe that in order to make "inferences drawn from [data]" that have validity, it is necessary to take into account the power dynamics at work in any research context and articulate those dynamics to readers. To this end, I argue that critical validity is the degree to which researchers reckon with the power dynamics in effect that inevitably impact or are a part of their research.

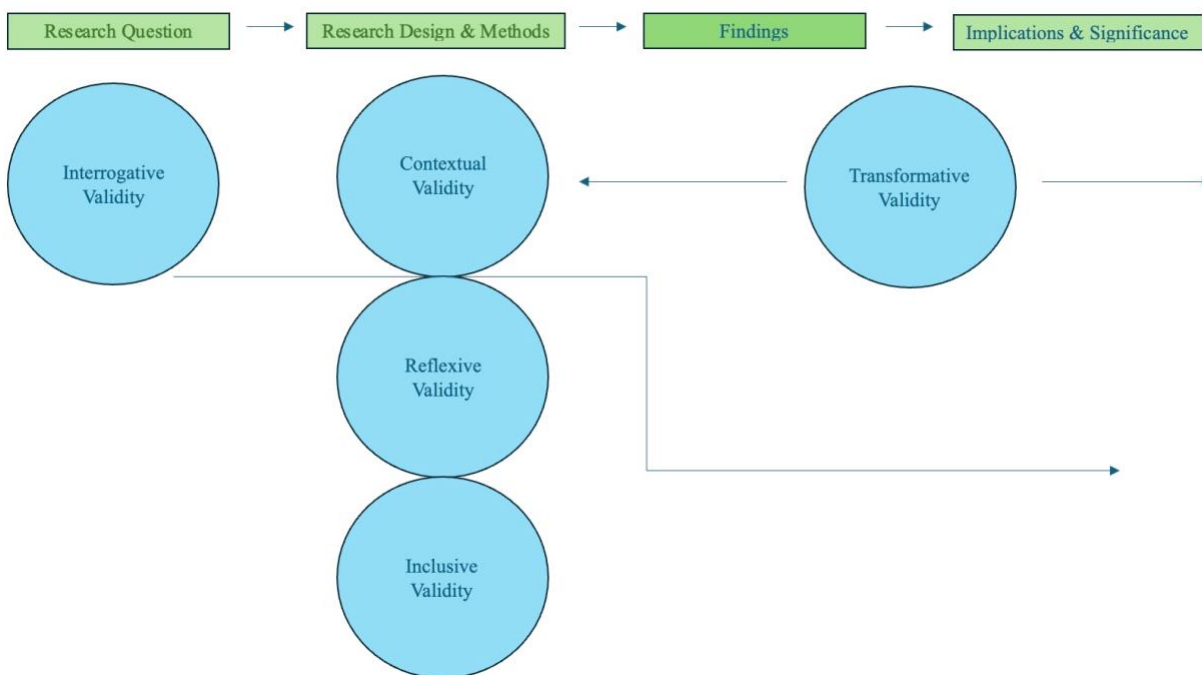
Because we, as education researchers, are examining inquiries largely within school systems and/or societal systems and bring our own set of intersectional identities to the work, there are always power dynamics at play. Therefore, I put forth a tool to aid in measuring the degree to which we are considering these power dynamics within our research and communicating those considerations to our audiences and readers. I refer to this tool as a set of critical validities. Without this tool, I fear that it becomes too easy to conduct research that reifies power structures or fails to capture the nuance of often complex webs of intersectional power. Education research that fails to interrogate these power structures is at risk of simply missing part of the broader story.

The Five Critical Validities

As part of the umbrella construct of critical validity, I propose the following five validity criteria: contextual, reflexive, interrogative, inclusive, transformative. None of these validities are necessarily new in concept; however, taken together, these specific validities allow researchers to dive deeper into the ways research can provide a critical lens to the world. They also allow researchers to further their own understanding of where research might perpetuate existing patterns or fail to examine some of the power structures that influence aspects of the work. Figure 1 provides a visual display of the criteria in conjunction with where they are likely most relevant to the research process. The subsequent sections detail each criterion in more depth.

Figure 1

The Five Validity Criteria



The first is contextual validity, defined as the extent to which the research thoroughly explores the dynamics of the context that surround the research participants, the phenomena, and/or sites and account for the various factors at play such as history, relationships between participants, relationships between participants and sites, and the nature of interactions between relevant actors among others. Given that a main purpose of qualitative research is to “take into account the natural contexts in which individuals or groups function” (Korstjens & Moser, 2017, p. 275) “to provide an in-depth understanding of real-world problems” (p. 275), it stands to reason that contextuality is a well-documented, integral aspect of qualitative research across all disciplines. As an extension

of this basic aspect of qualitative research, a thorough accounting for context allows researchers to better understand the way any type of power – social, economic, racial, legal, institutional, administrative, and gender-based, to name a few – functions within the environment of the phenomena under study. A research study with a high level of contextual validity might have thick descriptions of the aforementioned factors of history, participant relationships, sites, and so forth, it might supplement interview data with site observations to glean more contextual details about the site, and/or it might include questions in the interview protocol about perspectives on relationships with factors in the site. In Figure 1, contextual validity occurs most commonly and prominently in the research design and methods of a study whether it be in the description of the site, participants, or other aspects.

The second is reflexive validity, defined as the extent to which the researchers themselves examine their own subjectivity, biases, awarenesses, and identity characteristics that influence the way they conduct and interpret research. While more positivist theories of thought privilege objectivity and impartiality, one of the strengths of qualitative research is that the researcher's identities and lived experiences allow for unique insight throughout the research process (Bryman, 2016). Therefore, the perspectives and characteristics of researchers can help interpret data through a certain understanding or elicit insightful observations and findings. In order for researchers to arrive at these observations and findings and any audience to comprehend them with any clarity, the researchers need to engage in rigorous reflexive thought and disclose what they bring to the research. A research study with a high level of reflexive validity might provide an author positionality statement at the beginning of an article, discuss the way author identities inform the lens they bring to the data analysis process, and be an ever-present component of each step of the research process and section of the write-up. Qualitative methodologies such as auto-ethnography or narrative reflection that encourage reflexivity lend themselves well to a strong degree of reflexive validity. In Figure 1, reflexive validity occurs again in the research design and methods aspect of the research process as who the researcher(s) are impact the lens through which they make decisions about how, where, and from who to collect data.

The third is interrogative validity, defined as the extent to which the researchers ask questions about the power structures at play relevant to their research focuses, the sites in which they research, the relations between participants, and other relevant factors. Research studies that use critical theoretical or conceptual frameworks to interrogate aspects of the status quo, research guided by research questions that inquire specifically about aspects of a power structure, the status quo, or systemic oppression, or a research study that might use an interview protocol that asks participants about why things are the way they are and how those things impact people of different identities might have a high level of integrative validity. Using a more critical lens in the study design can increase interrogative validity; however, it does not have to be the case. For example, a study that does not necessarily have critically oriented research questions might unearth power dynamics that the researchers take up in the way they ask follow up questions of participants or collect more data. In Figure 1, interrogative validity occurs in line with the research questions that inform the study since the research questions guide the approach researchers take to answer a question or problem. Formulating research questions with an eye toward criticality bakes an

interrogative nature into the study itself. However, there's also an arrow that spans the entire research process as interrogative validity might start in the way research questions are constructed but extend through the way the study is then designed, the findings are analyzed, and the significance is reported.

The fourth is inclusive validity, defined as the extent to which the researchers or research purposely seek to elevate the voices and perspectives of individuals in areas where they might constitute the minority and/or be excluded from power. One way that power structures maintain power is by excluding, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the perspectives and voices of those not in power. Somewhat along the same lines as inclusive validity, Anderson and Herr (1999) offer democratic validity as part of their criteria for teacher research with the definition of “the extent to which research is done in collaboration with all parties who have a stake in the problem under investigation” (p. 16). Where inclusive and democratic validity differ, however, is that inclusive validity more radically extends to groups or individuals that might not necessarily have a stake due to the way that oppressive systems are built but should. Inclusive validity might also apply beyond teacher research to other types of qualitative research. Research studies that have a high degree of inclusive validity might highlight voices that provide alternative perspectives that challenge the status quo in some way. Teacher research, for example, generally has a built in degree of inclusive validity in the way that it is methodologically set up to put forth the voice of teachers in the predominantly university researcher-based world of academia. Other studies might seek to include a diverse array of participants that illuminate perspectives beyond solely the dominant one. In Figure 1, inclusive validity occurs most commonly in the research design and methods as researchers decide what participants or data to include.

The fifth is transformative validity, defined as the extent to which the research aims to reconstruct or reimagine a more socially just society. In other words, transformative validity measures a study's work in contributing to social change. Whereas inclusive validity focuses more on whose voices and perspectives are included in the research, transformative validity is a measure of the extent to which the study in its entirety – design, research questions, methods, orientations – works toward building a more equitable, humanity-focused, asset-based society. To tease out the difference between transformative and inclusive validity, a study might have transformative research questions designed with the purpose of bettering an aspect of society, giving it a high degree of transformative validity. However, the participants included in the study as relevant to the context might be limited, giving it a low degree of inclusive validity. For example, a study guided by a research question regarding how a district's curriculum aims to embody culturally responsive pedagogy to positively impact student sense of belonging and learning is designed with an inherently high degree of transformative validity as it seeks to examine the way curricula and pedagogy work toward affirming and effective student outcomes. However, the voices and perspectives included in the study determine its degree of inclusive validity. If the study solely drew upon curriculum documents created by district level administration, the degree of inclusive validity would be low. In contrast, if the study also drew upon perspectives from teachers, students, and parents/caregivers, the degree of inclusive validity would be high.

As part of Anderson and Herr's (1999) criteria for action research, they put forth catalytic validity – the degree to which the research process enables researchers to reconstruct their understanding of reality. While not dissimilar to the criterion of transformative validity in this study as both relate to an element of change or reconstruction, I understand catalytic validity to involve a change in the researcher's understanding of reality and transformative validity to involve or envision a change in the social justness of society or a microcosm of society (i.e. the education system). In Figure 1, transformative validity is situated between the findings and implications and significance as it is most readily apparent in the outcomes or impact of the outcomes in service of creating a better future.

The five validity criteria – contextual, reflexive, interrogative, inclusive, and transformative – operate together as a set to assist researchers in conceptualizing and appraising the degree to which aspects of their work challenge the status quo, resist pre-existing patterns, and expand criticality to dismantle oppressive structures. Table 1 provides a definition, relevant questions to consider for each validity, and potential strategies to gauge each validity. Additionally, the last column of Table 1 contains a description of a study with a high degree of that particular validity as an example.

Table 1

The Five Critical Validities

Validity	Definition	Relevant Questions	Possible Strategies	Example
Contextual	the extent to which the research thoroughly explores the dynamics of context that surround the research participants, sites, etc. and account for various factors such as actors at play, history, etc.	<p>What power dynamics are at play between the actors and the environment that surrounds the research phenomena?</p> <p>How do the power dynamics create access to resources and/or opportunities that differ based on a person's identities?</p>	<p>Thick descriptions</p> <p>Triangulation between multiple data sources</p> <p>Interview protocols that include questions intended to seek details about context</p>	Funk's (2025) work examines the experiences of one Black woman educator teaching secondary social studies in Tennessee. The study lays out the federal and state level context with respect to the many relevant events and legislation at the time in addition to the individual context of the study participant.
Reflexive	the extent to which the researchers themselves examine their own subjectivity, biases, awarenesses, and identity characteristics that influence the way they conduct and interpret research	<p>What experiences do I as the researcher bring to the research?</p> <p>What identity characteristics impact the way I approach the research?</p> <p>How does my intersection identity inform the lens I use at each step of the research process?</p> <p>What biases might I have that are necessary to be aware of as I engage in the research process?</p> <p>What strengths or unique perspectives do I bring to the research?</p>	<p>Positionality statements</p> <p>Descriptions of identity/lived experiences and how they inform the lens researchers bring to the work</p> <p>Autoethnographic or narrative reflection-based methods</p>	Martintelle et al.'s (2024) study contains a subsection labeled "researcher positionality" on page 230 that details important identity and experience related information about the authors that impact the lens they bring to the study. Furthermore, their roles within the course of focus are detailed further in a "context of the study" subsection, providing not only information on the authors themselves but the way that information interacts with their roles in the course.
Interrogative	the extent to which the researchers ask questions	In what ways, if any, does my research ask questions about power structures and/or the	Application of critical frameworks	Dobbs and Leider's (2021) study about early career teachers' beliefs

	about the power structures at play relevant to their research focuses, the sites in which they research, the relations between participants, etc.	status quo? How does the lens I use reveal aspects of power dynamics relevant to the research?	Research questions that focus on inquiring about aspects of the status quo Interview protocols that ask questions about why things are the way they are and what the impact is	related to language learning draws upon positioning and LangCrit theory to note that participant responses connected to personal experiences of language learning in their own lives or previous connected their individual stories to broader discourses and emphasized socially bounded hierarchies and the dominance of English as a teacher goal. The research aims, theoretical frameworks, and design of the study are setup to interrogate the power structures at play related language and the dominance of English in the U.S. education system.
Inclusive	the extent to which the researchers or research purposely seek to elevate the voices and perspectives of individuals in areas where they might constitute the minority	What voices are considered dominant with respect to the questions I am asking with my research? What voices are considered non-dominant with respect to the questions I am asking with my research? What voices and/or perspectives does my research center? In what ways can I include, if at all, the words, voices, and/or perspectives from a variety of individuals of different groups?	Member checking Multiple data sources from non-dominant viewpoints Inclusion of diverse array of participants	Renbarger et al.'s (2025) study about identifying strategies that school districts can use to overcome roadblocks to effective family and community collaboration since the onset of COVID-19 exemplifies a high degree of inclusive validity with respect to the diverse number of participants included that were relevant to the subject at hand. Interview participants included three district/school staff, four researchers, and eight community-engagement practitioners. Focus group participants included principals, teachers, and caregivers for a total of 47 participants.

				<p>Additionally, the study made efforts to include “those with perspectives on the challenges faced by marginalized populations” (p. 388).</p>
Transformative	<p>the extent to which the research aims to create a more socially just society and work toward equity and equality</p>	<p>In what ways, if any, does my research contribute to the goal of a more socially just world?</p> <p>In what ways, if any, does my research change an aspect of a power structure or shed light on an issue of social injustice?</p> <p>To what extent can the findings/conclusions of the study be used to construct a more just and equitable world?</p>	<p>Research questions that focus on inquiring about aspects of the status quo</p> <p>Application of critical frameworks</p>	<p>Brant’s (2024) study about how schools produce and reproduce policies and practices that harm transgender individuals draws upon qualitative interviews from seventeen gender diverse youth and identifies specific actions, practices, and policies that were helpful, purposefully harmful and unintentionally harmful. All three of the study’s research questions guide the work toward producing findings that assist in re-imagining schools and education for gender-diverse youth, particularly the third one: “In what ways can the experiences of these young people shape P-12 education and teacher education?” (p. 325).</p>

Application and Discussion

For the purposes of making the criteria more concrete, I exemplify the critical validities in action by applying them to two of my own research studies of different methodologies. While applying criteria to my own research articles involves a certain level of author subjectivity and bias that is worth noting, it also allows for making my own thinking process as it relates to the criteria clear. The first study (Nerlino, 2023) examined teacher perceptions of the media and public's portrayal of teachers and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic using survey data from 122 full-time, public-school teachers in Massachusetts. This study had a relatively high degree of contextual validity because it includes several sections detailing the state of policy and teaching in Massachusetts during the pandemic. It spelled out the context of the initial school closures and subsequent reopening sequence, the guidance from the state department of education, the backdrop of the teacher vaccine rollout, and specific headlines from major newspapers in the state. The purpose of including these details was to illustrate, as clearly as possible, the environment influencing the participants. The study had a moderate level of reflexive validity as I noted in a positionality statement that I myself was a full-time, public-school secondary English teacher in Massachusetts at the time, currently experiencing the phenomena under study. This aspect of my professional identity equipped me with unique insight that comes from the day-in-day-out experience of being a teacher at the while processing the rhetoric and policy about teachers and teaching.

In terms of interrogative validity, this study registers a moderate level. The research questions themselves are posed to somewhat challenge the status quo. The two research questions inquire into how teachers perceive the portrayal of themselves and their work in the news, media, and public during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact these perceptions have on teachers. Because of the historic feminization of the teaching profession in connection with well-established lower salaries, a lack of opportunity to influence policy, and the debate around whether or not teaching constitutes a profession, I would argue that there are elements of marginalization relevant to the working conditions and status of the profession inherent in asking about perceptions of teachers in the news, media, and public. Relatedly, this study has a moderate level of transformative validity in that it does strive to illuminate the way that negative perceptions of teachers further marginalize teachers and their work.

Lastly, the study has a modest level of inclusive validity. It does aim to elevate the voices of teachers and provide a platform to elucidate their views on the news, media, and public's perception of teaching. For this reason, the data solely consists of survey responses by teachers. At the same time, due to the concern about anonymity, the survey did not contain questions about teacher identity characteristics such as race, age, socioeconomic status and so forth. This limitation restricted any efforts to specifically target the experiences and perceptions of teachers of color and other historically oppressed groups of teachers whose intersectional identities would be important to include in this study.

The second study (Nerlino, 2025) is a piece of teacher research that documented my efforts as a secondary English teacher to introduce and then refine an inquiry project into my 11th grade English classes over the course of several years. This study had a relatively high degree of contextual validity with the inclusion of details about the grade, level, classes, and curriculum

in which the research took place. Furthermore, much of the impetus of the study came from the way the COVID-19 pandemic was impacting students; therefore, descriptions of the broader contextual backdrop were included.

With respect to reflexive validity, I included a positionality statement that detailed aspects of my own identity and previous teaching experience in the school and teaching the class in which I introduced and refined the project. Comparatively to the two aforementioned validities, the study had a lower degree of interrogative validity. It did prioritize adjusting a more student-centered project per Dewey (1938) and Freire's (1970) notions of designing curriculum around student agency in a way that brings their interests to the forefront; therefore, the research brought to light the power dynamics between teacher and student as well as the greater curricular system in the U.S. that still relies on the transmission based method of teaching. In terms of inclusive validity, it did include the voices of students through the use of their final reflections as data sources. Additionally, as a teacher myself, it uplifts teacher generated knowledge into the sphere of academia and research education. However, the inclusive validity could be improved by disaggregating student reflection by identity characteristics to see how the project and adjustments impacted different groups of students. With respect to transformative validity, it offered some degree as the insights could assist in the redesign of curriculum and teaching in high school English classrooms to be less transmission based – an approach that tends to re-imprint the status quo – and more student centered – an approach that elevates student thinking and inquiry. However, the findings related to adjustments to the project to improve student ownership over topics and the acquisition of meaningful research skills. Thus, the way in which the research challenged the status quo was slightly more indirect.

Comparing the application of these criteria to these two studies side by side for the purpose of further discussion, I would gauge the first example study as having a higher overall level of critical validity than the second. This estimation does not value one study over another as a whole but is helpful in that it teases out what the study does and does not offer by way of critical findings and contributions to the field. Furthermore, these criteria work in tandem with other criteria to ensure different types of validity. For example, in the teacher research study (Nerlino, 2025), I used Anderson and Herr's (1999) evaluative criteria for teacher research to help me better understand the way the research contributed to literature about student-centered forms of curriculum and pedagogy as well as literature that uses the same teacher research methodology. Some research such as teacher research inherently has some inclusive validity because it is elevating a teacher's voice and putting forth teacher generated knowledge of practice. However, the application of these criteria might help other research to take pains to increase its inclusive validity by prompting researchers to think through subgroups or other data sources that could be included.

In order to further operationalize these criteria, Table 2 contains each validity criteria with a checklist. The checklist consists of items that might help evaluate a piece of research using the criteria; however, the checklist for each criterion is not meant to serve as a list of requirements. Rather, it provides some ideas to think about as a researcher to work toward each criterion or a means for reviewers, readers, or consumers to evaluate a piece of work.

Table 2

Critical Validity Criteria Checklists

Critical Validity Criteria	Checklist
Contextual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Includes detailed descriptions of the context of the study -Captures the relationships between participants, environment, and research phenomena -Investigates the history of power dynamics within the site under study -Takes note of current power dynamics within the site under study -Includes means within data collection for participants to share about the site dynamics -Triangulation between multiple data sources to obtain as full an understanding as possible of site dynamics, relationships, etc.
Reflexive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Includes a positionality statement exploring researcher's intersectional identities -Utilizes methods such as autoethnography or narrative inquiry that promote self-understanding -Contains descriptions of relevant lived experiences that might influence the lens a researcher brings to the study -Includes a self-bias inventory -Specifies the data analysis process in detail -Includes descriptions of decision-making processes on the part of the researcher in methods and findings sections
Interrogative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Employs research questions that ask about power structures or the status quo relevant to the site or phenomena under study -Utilizes critical theoretical or conceptual framework to make philosophical underpinnings explicit and challenge existing power structures -Includes interview questions, survey questions or other means to target data collection in a way that gleans information about the status quo or power dynamics -Integrates a critical lens into the data analysis process (i.e. a codebook that draws from a critical theoretical or conceptual framework) -Uses a critical orientation to organize the findings of the study -Includes a discussion of the significance or impact of the findings that attend to power dynamics or the status quo
Inclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Includes a wide variety of participants that represent different groups, lived identities, and perspectives on a phenomena -Prioritizes the inclusion of participants or perspectives from marginalized populations -Utilizes member checking to accurately center the voices of participants and minimize the way the researcher might influence the perspectives/words of the participants -Co-authors with a member of the community under study -Makes participation in the study for all groups accessible and convenient and removes barriers to participation -Parses out power dynamics relevant to the phenomena or site under study and makes an effort to include aspects of all perspectives
Transformative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Uses research questions that set the study up to ask about aspects of the status quo and challenge or reconstruct systems for equity purposes -Makes use of a research design that contributes knowledge that improves the human condition and/or contributes to a more just future -Explores new ways to approach systems or aspects of society that create improvement for all people -Uses aspects of the research design to dismantle processes, the status quo, or systems that further oppression -Employs methodologies that promote liberatory practices -Addresses limitations to the study

Limitations

The purpose of putting forth these criteria is for them to serve as a guide rather than an end-all-be-all or a check-the-box tool that automatically translates a piece of research into a critical work. Essentially, these criteria support criticality as a spectrum and not a destination. Fulfillment of a critical validity criterion does not make a study critical or not critical; instead, it evaluates the study for one particular aspect, allowing researchers to look at what critical aspects exist as strengths and what aspects might lack within the larger scope of the study.

These criteria do not provide immunity from bias but might operate as a construct that assist researchers in thinking through more specific aspects of their studies and how they might support or detract from the overall critical validity of a work. Lincoln (2001) asserts, "...validity resides in three broad sites in any given research project: within the data, within the analysis of the data, and within the conceptual basis or assumptions which form the research program of the analytic techniques" (p. 41). While Lincoln's assertion provides three broad categories where critical validity might exist, the criteria themselves allow for more specific actions or ideas to include within these broader categories.

Conclusion

Qualitative research has long allowed for researchers to "draw out the complexities of social problems" (McAleese et al., 2019) in a way that gives credence to the human experience. As such, qualitative research can serve as a fundamentally liberatory platform. As another tool to grapple with the power dynamics, intersectional intricacies, and other factors at play, the concept of critical validity can be used at any point in the design, refinement, and analysis part of the research process and draws upon strategies and concepts already defined within qualitative research. This framework for critical validity offers a set of criteria to tease out how a piece of qualitative research interacts with power structures that are embedded within society in order to fulfill a liberatory purpose.

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