

ON VALIDITY: A CREDO

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In this paper I want to discuss the question of validity. The profound shifts that have taken place in research thinking have reopened many issues concerning research practices. The last several decades have seen a radical ferment in theories of research. For years before the nineteen sixties, the positivist theory of research was the single dominant research theory in the United States – so much so that the positivist mode, with its emphasis on objectivity, detachment, and quantitative bias, was widely thought to be the approach that defined the entire research domain.

Beginning in the nineteen sixties, the research world began to widen markedly. As I have said earlier (Seeman, 1988), there was

a shift away from the ethos of constriction toward an ethos of inclusion. The forces that drove psychology in the 1930s and 1940s came to be experienced as rigid, confining, and sterile. A revived flexibility, characterized by increased receptivity to pluralism in theory and method, came to be the norm. (p. 149)

With this new perspective, positivist modes of research came to be less dominant, only one approach among many. Our scientific and intellectual world today recognizes more clearly that there are multiple theories of knowledge, and that the diverse theories of research are simply reflections and applications of these multiple theories of knowing.

In times of scientific and intellectual ferment such as that which exists today the dialectic process is energized, and experimentation with new forms of research is accelerated. At the same time, old forms are questioned, altered, or discarded. But it is in the character of the dialectic process that these swings of thought can move away abruptly from the old forms, and in the process sweep away useful concepts along with obsolete ones.

It is my belief that this dialectic process has obscured the role of validity procedures in qualitative research – that there has been a dilution in the role ascribed to validity, to the detriment of research authenticity. My own conjecture about the uncertainty of the role that validity plays in the new research stems from the confusion about the roles of subjectivity and objectivity in qualitative research. It is natural and valid for the humanistically oriented investigator to value the role of subjectivity because she/he often wishes to ascertain directly the experiential data of the persons chosen to be research participants. We seek to know the participants' inner life, their subjective strivings. We are aware that in this quest we cannot know if we have achieved ultimate truth. But we do know that if we can provide certain conditions, a climate of safety and trust, we can maximize the probability that we have made true connection with our research partners. Several person-centered investigators have described these conditions (see, for example, Wolter-Gustafson, 1990).

Then where do objectivity and evidence come in? These elements come in when we as investigators choose to present a public document. As I have said elsewhere (Seeman, 1990), "Theories were never intended to be private reflections. They are, on the contrary, intended as public statements, general in application and subject to the discipline of public verification" (p. 383). We cannot ask an unknown audience to take our word on faith. What I am arguing here is that the need for validation procedures is integral to the process of inquiry itself. In a public forum where we write for a public audience, the issue of plausibility and trustworthiness cannot be assumed, but must be confronted and documented in our work.

If there has been confusion about the role of validity procedures, as I have argued here, I believe that the confusion concerns the difference between the fact of validity and the form of validity. I have argued here that the fact of validity is generic to the process of inquiry itself. It is the form of inquiry that is variable. Our validation procedures are likely to vary in accordance with the theory of knowledge of which the researcher is committed. The positivist theory of pre-existing received knowledge disposes the positivist to seek for validation through impersonal, detached, and objective means so that the knowledge and reality "out there" can be discerned without the intrusion of the subjective feelings that the investigator may have. The humanist/phenomenologist, on the other hand, argues that many of our realities are indigenous to us as persons, that these realities have much to do with our experience and our perception. Consequently our general truths as humans are reflected in our shared realities, and validity may be assessed precisely in the context of these shared realities. Carr (1987) reflected well this phenomenological perspective:

Intersubjectivity is in fact one of the most important new features to be noticed . . . If our experience is always already enmeshed in a world, it is a world we share with others. The objectivity of its objects is really their public character; our conviction that they are not ours alone is a function of our interaction with others and our sense that we all experience and are part of the same world. (p. 11)

What Carr is proposing here is that our realities may be tested and checked through the process of consensual validation, a process that is uniquely appropriate to phenomenological theory. This concept supplies a principle of validation that we can readily utilize in the inquiry and theory development process. What remains for us to do is to devise validity technologies in accord with this principle. In that task we do not have to start anew. Many validity technologies already in place utilize the principle of agreement among observers. It is a technology benign in principle, and practical for our use.

As we look more closely in our search for validity technologies that are in harmony with phenomenological theory and inquiry, we will find that the theory itself provides useful and exciting leads for validity strategies. One of the founders of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (1965), defined phenomenology as a science dealing with the direct phenomena of consciousness, the data of direct experience. In that spirit, much of our research is focused on direct contact with research participants, on in-depth interviewing as a way of eliciting the direct data of consciousness. In this same spirit, we no longer talk about "subjects" but about "research partners," "co-researchers" or "research participants" to symbolize the fact that we are talking about direct and active engagement with persons and not with passive recipients of our research manipulations. It follows, then, that these same participants can contribute to the task of consensual validation through systematic forms of checking and feedback to ascertain the extent to which the investigator has captured the essence of the message that the participant supplied. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have characterized this procedure as a "member check" and describe the

procedure in detail. The same book has many other fruitful ideas about accountability and validation. Other examples are to be found in issues of the five-volume journal *Person-Centered Review*. One entire issue, in fact, is devoted to inquiry and the person-centered approach (May, 1990).

It may be evident by now that validation procedures serve not only to fulfill the writer's responsibilities as an investigator, but also serve to support the investigator's assertions and the research participants' contributions to the inquiry process.

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