


Validity as Research Praxis: A Study of Self-Reflection and Engagement in Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative Inquiry
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DOI: 10.1177/1077800416686371
journals.sagepub.com/home/qix


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Abstract

This article continues explorations into the concept of validity by looking closely at the notion of praxis as it might be involved in establishing validity through the *doing* of qualitative inquiry. Departing from thinking of the qualitative researcher as an instrument to thinking of the engagement of the researcher in the research process as praxis-oriented, new ways of thinking about how validity is established intra-actively are articulated. I report on an in-depth qualitative interview study of nine Christian women talking about their faiths. Instead of focusing on the substantive findings of the article, I analyzed the researcher–participant interactions using the concept of praxis to articulate five distinct ways validity was established through the researching process. These findings challenge correspondence theories of truth as the basis for validity and, instead, engage in a dialogic, complex notion of truth-telling as the point of resonance for validity.

Keywords

praxis, validity, active interviewing, methodologies, researcher positionality

Introduction

Recently, I went to an emergent theater production in my community. I almost always attend these, and I am guaranteed to be moved by the performance. These productions focus on contemporary issues of social justice and therefore invite consciousness-raising and dialogue. This time, I was particularly motivated to think through truth and ethics as they were brought to life performatively. During the after-show “talk-back”, actors kept saying that they were able to use the theater *to be more honest, more truthful* than they are in their everyday lives. They said they were able to engage with “raw” truth and to explore experiences more authentically than they are typically able to do. Pablo Picasso famously said,

We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies. (Scot Borofsky, 2003).

Through the careful contrivance of context and material, actors can perform opportunities for understanding through which truth can be inferred and validity can be reconstructed. This is not the truth of our forefathers—where some singular notion of truth stands decontextualized (outside of and extracted from) the truth-telling (see Kuntz, 2015). Instead, for the actors, and probably for Picasso, this conceptualization of truth is multiplied, complex, and

partial. It is performative and thereby inextricably involved in claiming identities. This is the sense in which agency can never totally be abstracted from an actor—Through performance, we cannot avoid claiming ourselves, our identities. These identities, then, are not abstracted (or extracted to use Aaron Kuntz’s, 2015, concept) from the context of validity and truth but are deeply and intimately within that context. Yet, in terms of our researcherly sense of validity, researcher identification has been more prominently associated with bias than with validity and, even so, this association has not often been closely examined (see Peshkin, 1988, for an exception). It is common for qualitative researchers to write/talk about their own positionality as part of the interpretive process, but the details of the relationship between that positionality and the interpretive process have not been typically described. In qualitative research, we have long-acknowledged that the researcher is engaged in the process and cannot be legitimately ignored, and yet our ways of bringing the researcher into our analysis and our conversations about validity have been limited by the language and concepts of traditional methodologies.

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Drawing on Habermas (1981/1984, 1981/1987, for examples) and Carspecken (1996, 2002, 2003, for examples), I previously advocated for a complex unifying orientation toward validity (Dennis, 2013b) which relied on conceptualizing research as a dialogic performance. At that time, I raised the possibility that one aspect of validity can be described as Dasein, which I characterized as self-knowledge, certainty, ways the researcher is identifying herself with/in the research process, and praxis. In this article, I intend to explore that aspect of validity further. I hope to open up a conversation about the communicative links of research practice and researcher praxis to research validity. I use the validity analysis of a study I conducted with religious practitioners as the empirical trampoline for this idea. I analyzed my own interpretive work by reconstructing assumptions about validity entailed in the interpretations. When I did this, I located several senses in which validity took the shape of praxis.

Conceptual Preliminaries

Although validity is a contested concept among qualitative researchers, the stronghold of truth correspondence logics and empiricist forms of realism set anchor into our methodological conversations about validity in such a way as to make it quite difficult to free ourselves from related assumptions when we enact validity practices in our research. A correspondence theory of truth purports that there is a truth and our claims about it must correspond to the actuality of that truth—The closer the correspondence, the stronger the validity of the claim. Many qualitative researchers have resisted the correspondence vestiges of positivist thinking (beginning with the works of Denzin, 2003; Guba, 1981; Lincoln, 1995, for examples, and including current trends in post-qualitative inquiry through St. Pierre's, 2000, work, for example). In an effort to describe the quality and value of our research work, a proliferation of terms was set in motion through active critiques of post-positivist assumptions. For example, Patti Lather (2007) introduced the idea of *catalytic validity*, through which we are asked to assess the validity of our studies from the perspective of its merits for participants of the studies themselves. This is one way of conceptualizing validity outside of the correspondence theories of truth which have dominated empiricist and post-positivist thinking.

Despite long-standing critiques of correspondence theories of truth, this underlayment is still quite prevalent in contemporary conversations across the spectrum of research approaches. The way we talk about validity implicates a way of thinking about it. The validity pressure points with correspondence theories of truth include (a) making sure the language of our claim is a precise descriptive match for the thing about which we are making claims and (b) making sure our route to knowledge about the thing is unproblematic

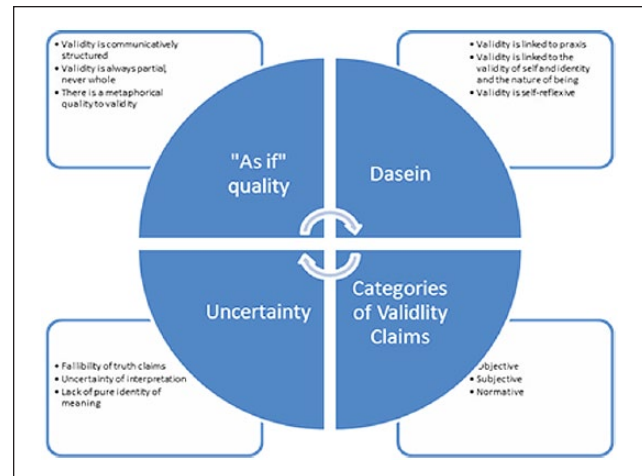


Figure 1. Conceptualizing validity.

and direct. Unfortunately, this way of thinking about truth and validity fails to capture the complexity of human social life and knowledge while producing a static and faulty conceptualization of truth (which can be dismantled through post-structuralist, post-modern, new materialist, and critical thinking). A dialogic orientation toward truth resituates the pressure points of validity as communicative negotiations and responsibilities.

Habermas (1981/1984, for example) provided a guide for thinking about truth claims in a different way. He suggests that truth claims are intrinsically grasped as claims to validity—that is, our claims to truth always implicate their own validity criteria. If I claim to be the author of this article, then, validation of that claim would minimally involve definitions of authorship (within the relevant community), evidence of the writing as mine (drafts on my computer, for example), and perhaps evidence that I am me. The act of validating and the act of claiming are connected. The bases of this would hold whether we were talking about claims in the ordinary interactive context or claims that are part of the outcomes and processes of research. Validating truth claims is an interpretive, inferential process, not a correspondence process. Accordingly, truth claims are communicative acts which carry forth through particular kinds of communicative commitments always already emergent from within a host of cultural and linguistic practices. In other words, validity is internal to truth—It does not stand outside of truth as a way of judging truth but rather is implicated in how we claim truth. Truth is always at least implicit in communicative acts of any kind, not just research. Thus, any communicative act will have concepts of truth and validity implicitly within it. There is an intra-relation between truth and validity when we engage communicatively.

Figure 1 illustrates how I have translated my understanding of Habermas's ideas into validity conceptualizations (taken from Dennis 2013b). I indicated four ways of

thinking about validity, one of which is Dasein—the focus of this particular article.

Although whole volumes have been written to discuss the meaning of Dasein, I use it here to indicate that quality of my self-understanding which must, at the end of the day, be mine to care about and to claim. It is the idea that my “Self” is uniquely at stake every time I act, including when I am acting as a researcher. At the end of the day, people (including those engaged in research) are validated through the freely offered recognition by their social peers which establishes (however tenuously) one’s worthwhileness. This can be linked to a post-Marxist interpretation of praxis as it relates to identity: I have a need to know myself as a valid worthwhile person, and this self-knowledge is dependent upon the recognition of an Other who can freely assent or agree that I am such a person. Usually these identity securing agreements are implicitly established through performance as we bring ourselves into being and into recognition through our actions. Thinking of validity in this way produces a set of potential characteristics of validity such as the following:

- Praxis is a validity-dependent identity securing social accomplishment
- Validity of all truth claims will have Self/identity validity embedded within them
- Validity is self-reflective

As indicated, this orientation toward validity draws directly on three conceptual nodes. The first conceptual node articulates notations of truth and validity from an action theoretical perspective (drawn primarily from Habermas, Carspecken, and previous studies of my own). The second conceptual node involves a post-Marxian concept of praxis (Carspecken, 1999). The third conceptual node emanates from a pragmatic, performative concept of Self and identity (Denzin, 2003; Goffman, 1978; Mead, 1934). Moreover, the idea that the Self is intrinsically intra-active (always already connected with others) is an important assumption to thinking of praxis as part of an intra-action (Barad, 2008). This assumption is an onto-epistemological one advancing the idea that being is intra-activity constitutive. There is no being without intra-action.

According to my agential realist account, matter is not mere stuff, an inanimate given-ness. Rather, matter is substance in its iterative intra-active becoming—not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency. It is morphologically active, responsive, generative, and articulate. Mattering is the ongoing intra-active differentiating of the world. Intra-actions enact agential cuts, which are a cutting together-apart (that is, entangling-differentiating), as one move (not sequential acts). (Barad’s, 2012, interview with Kleinman, p. 80)

With respect to researcher identity, the concept of intra-action critiques the idea that the researcher exists separate

and distinct from her constituting activity. It is that intra-activity (as the work of both difference and entanglement) that makes it possible to be recognized interactively and socially.

Method

The analysis for this article pulls from an in-depth qualitative interview study I conducted with religious practitioners on the topic of their beliefs. From March 2012 to the present, I have had a sign outside my office, inviting religious practitioners to participate in the study. Word of mouth also resulted in expanding the numbers of participants. The purpose of the study is to explore the communicative and psychological negotiations of objectivity and subjectivity in talk about one’s beliefs. I carried out three interviews with almost all the participants to date. The first interview focused on the development of core beliefs and ideas about truth. The second interview focused on beliefs and ideas about truth as they relate to scientific and social phenomena—like global warming and abortion. Each of these interviews was video-recorded. For the third interview, I created a movie from a series of clips taken from each participant’s first two interviews. During the third interview, I played these individually created movies for each of the participants, using a unique set of questions that linked to the movie. Although the questions were idiosyncratic, their focus was similar—providing an opportunity for participants to further explicate their beliefs in the light of challenges. The third interview was also video-recorded. We watched clips and stopped to talk after each one.

Although I began the study in 2012, I am still in the process of collecting data, so I am not going to report on the findings related to the specific purpose of the study (see Dennis, 2013a, for a preliminary report). Most of the participants thus far have been Christian women (10 women—nine identifying as Christian; and five men—four identifying as Christian). For this article, I analyzed my own interpretive work by reconstructing assumptions about validity entailed in those interpretations. My analysis was accomplished using reconstructive coding (Carspecken, 1996). Still in the preliminary stages of analysis, I focused on the interviews with female-identifying, White, Christian participants (the largest group of participants). I linked interpretations about validity with identity claims and praxis. When I did this, I located several senses in which validity took the shape of praxis. Those senses will be presented in the “Interpretations” section below.

In terms of traditional validity approaches, I used recording devices, transcribed through multiple listenings, and peer debriefed the transcriptions. I conducted member checks with the interview transcriptions and shared an initial paper with the participants. I also engaged in consistency checks, negative case analysis, and strip analysis (Carspecken, 1996, drawn in part from Lincoln and Guba) to establish interpretive validity.

The investigation is unique both in its efforts to study validity organically and in its conceptualization of validity as praxis (which was highlighted through the analysis).

Interpretations

Weatherhead (1965) referred to Kierkegaard as saying “I don’t know the truth except when it becomes part of me” (p. 57). If we transpose this midcentury thinking to account for our efforts to understand others, we might have something like this: *To understand something someone else holds to be true, I must recognize it. To recognize it, I must grasp what it would take for me to make the same claim. I am continuously inspired by the writing of Gillian Rose (1996) who called us to imagine the horrific Nazi not only as Other but also as Self.* The truth/validity point here is that when we listen to the claims of others, our interpretations involve position-taking, which intrinsically require our own self-commitments and positionings within the interpretations. Thus, it seems to me that the validity of our interpretations involves a self-reflection.

Such ideas of “Self” point away from an ontologically secured Self through its existence of being, and instead point toward the Self as an ongoing intra-actively secured interpolation that involves an intersubjective taking up of validity through the recognition of Others’ claims, including the language and concepts implicit to those claims.

This way of thinking “Self” is also a way of noting the deep ethicality of the Self. That is, an intra-actively constructed Self is one always dialogically constituted through its openness to difference. Such openness to difference, both paradigmatically and linguistically, is intrinsically connected to one behaving ethically.

Praxis, then, is *the (ethical) labor* of understanding the Self by recognizing the Self as Other, the Self in Other. Each of the forms of praxis I articulate below were reconstructed through the interviews across all nine Christian women and emerged as part of a validity focus within the interactions themselves.

Praxis as Intentional and Personal Interest

Interest is expressed in a variety of ways that can be documented linguistically—Perhaps one could even create a typology of interest markers. Likewise, my analysis suggests a variety of ways in which interest can be documented in the transcription, for example, by asking questions that are not on the protocol to follow-up on important stories for the participant. Also, engaging in non-verbal encouragements like head nods and prosodic forays like uh-huhs used to connect to the ongoing flow. When I do these things, my interest as researcher is connected with the participant in an embodied way. I’m leaning in, making eye contact, and asking more questions; I am indicating in my responsiveness

that my participant is talking both *with* me and *for* me—always, at least in part, *for me*. A personal me. A present me. And, I am accepting this *with* and *for* me—taking up my part in it. The praxis here is not about being an instrument who successfully elicits and reproduces the information provided by the interviewee as a recording device might do. The purpose is not instrumental. My interest is not a means to an end. Instead, the praxis is about being interested in the stories, the lives, the personess of the interviewee. I am genuinely interested, and that interest is honored through the stories. This kind of interest is not about the research questions, it’s not about obtaining a particular kind of information; it is, instead, *care* as interest in the person (what some Heidegger scholars consider the very heart of Dasein). When one is engaged in this way, the praxis involves identity claims that are at least benign and most often goodwill toward the Other. One’s interest and the commitment it constitutes is toward the Other and toward accepting as a gift the *with me* and *for me* aspects of the storytelling. A *with me* and *for me* connection of the researcher accepting a relational position with the participant is conjoined with an ethics of accepting the Other’s outstretched hand, the Other’s offering of Self.

Here is an example from my first interview with Sam, a heterosexual single woman in her 30s. Sam was raised in a Christian church. Near the beginning of the first interview, we are seated near one another in my office.

Sam: Talking about her experiences with her childhood church. She seemed to be wrapping that up. *So I have a lot of memories growing up in that church.* [Barb: *Ah yeah*] *Yeah.*

Barbara: *Like what are the first ones that pop into your head?* [Notes 4/2016: I was leaning in to hear her talk and I remember how much of her story was similar to my own. It was easy for me to connect with the stories she told.]

Sam: *umm, my entire childhood was the same minister. And he actually, until I was probably out of college just never really retired and was the minister for a really long time. So I have a lot of memories of him and I still, to this day, he is one of my favorite people. He’s just a really warm, supportive, you know kind of jolly person. And, um, some things like that. I have memories, distinct memories, of being in church. And I remember one lesson I was in, I probably remember it because for some reason I was in the adult class and I, it was, for one, the first time I was in the adult Sunday school class and they were talking about what heaven is and all the different theories and philosophies about what heaven is* [Barb: *Oh wow*] *Yeah. I remember. I just have a distinct memory of that for some reason.* [Barb: *Yeah. Huh.*] *Yeah.*

Barbara: *Do you have feelings associated with your memories of the church?*

Sam: *I have yet, I feel like, very warm feelings. I've often been in arguments with my friends, especially in my later life and I am very pro-organized religion where most people my age aren't [garbled on the recording] [Barb: Right] and, I think in part because I've had such a . . . fantastic experience and friends of mine who for some reason have gone to church with me and now when I go back and I see that its, you know, the Presbyterian church is, especially, it tends to be a very older population and so I think that's one of the problems of the church is there's very few young people, b-so when I go home and visit it doesn't bother me because I'm not there normally, but when I go home and visit it's like having a hundred grandparents because they all know what I'm doing, they want to know what I'm doing and they're so, like, excited to see me and I get hugs and its just always been a place of incredible support for me. And so that's what I think about when I think about that kind of experience [Barb: Yeah] Yeah. Mm-uh. [Barb: Cool]*

The way I am thinking that validity relates to praxis through this category is that my (the researcher's) genuine interest opens a space for the participant to experience being personally recognized as interesting in her own right. She is being validated as a worthwhile and interesting person, as someone who knows what she is talking about and whose experiences matter. It is the enactment of my interest in the space of the interview which validates, through recognition, that we matter to one another in this moment. This mattering to one another, this caring for one another, and expressing genuine interest validates our mutual desires to benefit one another (tacit) and the identity claims through which the interest is structured. This praxis could be involved in any data created through interactive means with the researcher-participant.

The communicative validity implicit in this form of praxis is that of validating the speaker as interesting and worthwhile and knowledgeable for one's self in the context of the research. The validity is established not external to the research acts, but through the communicative activities internal to them. Intra-action involves who the researcher and the participant are for and with one another. I used the conjunctions WITH and FOR to suggest that the two are co-involved in being, doing, becoming (Carspecken & Cordeiro, 1995) through their relation.

Praxis as Listening Passed the Facts

When I am interviewing someone, listening is fundamental. I am listening for more than the objective factual aspects of a story or experience. In fact, I can say that at some moments, I have been *uninterested* in the factual status of the story or in re-telling the factual aspects while being highly interested in the way the interviewee is situating herself in the story. This way of thinking about validity

challenges any superficial focus on the facticity of what interviewees are saying as the be-all-end-all to validity. Perhaps interviewees are even making up a story, and yet, there is still validity in what they are saying.

For example, Eleanor, a woman in her 60s who has been a dedicated, lifelong Christian, was trying to explain that having administrative leadership in her church was not a lucrative venture. She wanted me to know that it is hard work with no tangible earthly payoff. In the midst of making her point, she said,

Our [highest church official] lives in his own little house in [the city] that he built with his hands, I'm not sure that's exactly the truth for the [highest church official] right now. But, there are no trappings [Barb: But, it's not like they are accruing massive amounts of money]. You don't work for the church if you are aiming to get rich.

In this example, Eleanor wanted me to listen for the point that even the highest leaders in the church are not getting a lot of financial privilege from their positions—This is a spiritual calling, not a money scheme. This is the truth claim to be validated. I heard her. She did not want me to focus on the facticity of the particular example she used.

Gina, another lifelong Christian in her 60s, was telling me a story about lady from her church. It occurred to Gina that this story provided a good example, but she did not want the example to be written about or used because it could put the lady she was describing in a negative light—She just drew on it to help me understand the point she was trying to make.

Gina: I know you are not going to put this [meaning the specific things she had been telling me about a particular person] into anything. But she [the woman she is telling me about] talks about her experiences, who doesn't use words well, whose social skills are not . . . She's very special. Gina continues on with her story and then I reassure her that I am not going to judge the woman she is talking about and that I would only listen to the heart of what she wants me to hear. I wouldn't need to use anything she asked me not to use.

Barbara: It's really surprising isn't it sometimes. It kind of reminds me that, like that light [Gina had been talking about the light you can see in people as the light of the Divine], you can share it with people and there is something that happens, it seems like when you share you are in it together. But you know in the U.S., in this mainstream culture we learn so much about how to judge people by their appearance and by this criteria and you can't use . . . [You can see here that I am responding by trying to summarize the point I think Gina is trying to make without any direct reference to the person or the example that she has asked me not to share.]

Gina: Then Gina gets to the point, the point that she used the example to build, all the while, not wanting me to specify it or its facticity. *And sometimes there are little gifts running around and if you are not paying attention you will miss the gift.*

The praxis here is linked to the horizon of meaning—sharing the gist of a message where specific examples do not have to be precisely or factually shared to understand the truth. The truth *lies* somewhere within the point being made, and it is not an objective correspondence to a particular fact. It is, instead, an instantiation of a possibility which is indicative of the truth. In Eleanor's story, the truth had to do with the character of the church leaders. The truth in Gina's story also had to do with seeing the character of a person. In both the cases, the interviewees were asking me to look beyond the appearance of facticity to the character manifested in that appearance. I listened for this gist, connecting with interviewees on the point they were invested in, which is evidenced in the way I responded. The praxis of mutual understanding is mutually affirming. Validation in this way is about centering on the gist of the communication, the point of it, hearing through the communication what is being claimed to be true. It involves knowing what to query. Grasping the claims to truth which implicate the gist of what is being said means that as researchers, we are not busily distracted validating the presentation of faulty facts but, instead, are attuned to validate through query, the meaningful point being made. One would draw on communicative awareness to locate the gist.

Praxis as Joining Together

During my interactions with participants in the study, there are moments in which a "we" is established that concretely indicates the conjoined relation of the interviewee and me. This happened in two ways. Sometimes, the joining was established through an assumed set of shared norms AND/OR through a shared set of knowledge assumptions. In addition, joining took the form of linguistic anchors—where one of us invited the Other to join in agreement either through laughter or saying, "you know what I mean" and other such ways of saying, "we agree about this." The joining was structured through an us/them contrast that worked in the negative to say WE are *not* like THEM or it in the positive assuming WE are the SAME. Both of these forms implied the Other and both referenced the acceptance/rejection of norms on behalf of WE. Teresa was in her early 40s. She had been a practicing Christian since she was in her early 20s. She was married with two children. At the time of the study, she was questioning her faith. During her third interview, Teresa reflected on beliefs that have changed for her over time. She talked about a particularly uncommon Christian belief.

Barbara: *Do you still believe that?*

Teresa: *I don't know.* [Big laugh] [Barb: Only slightly laughs] *I don't think so. I think if it isn't in the normal Bible, I probably wouldn't believe it . . .* [talks with Barbara about different translations of the Bible]

Barbara: *Wow.* (acknowledging the big shift in Teresa's approach). [Teresa: *Uh-huh.* Nods. Smirks.]

In the above exchange, Teresa laughed, but I didn't really join in. Then, after she finished explaining her perspective, I said, "Wow," and she nodded vigorously saying, "Uh-huh." It is at this point that we have joined in the acceptance of the norm "Change and uncertainty should be embraced."

At the time of the study, *Susan* was in her mid-60s. She was raised Christian, but had switched denominations from Catholic to Protestant as an adult. She often invited me to "join" her by saying things like, "You know what I mean" as a statement not a question. For example, she talked about beliefs in angels, remarked that her husband thought such beliefs were funny, and then went on to explain the validity of the belief, inviting me to join her by saying, "you know what I mean" and nodding as if to say, "We are in agreement about this, despite what others believe."

Elizabeth was a 20-something evangelical Christian. During the third interview, she was describing how people have different associations with their own faith. During the second interview, she talked about her sister in this regard. I joined her by bringing that memory back into the third interview.

Elizabeth: *Sometimes I feel that when you go to Bible class, it almost just becomes this separate content area as opposed to something you really have to think about. . . . Some people just take it, like I will always believe this . . . like math. . . . But I felt like our church was a nice place to ask tough questions.* [In the previous interview Elizabeth had talked about her sister not having that same kind of church group where she was encouraged to ask a lot of questions.]

Barbara: *You said something about your sister. I didn't put that in the clip.*

Elizabeth: *I think she [sister] would probably say she is a Christian. . . . She went to Texas ATM and people will claim Christianity but will not act in a very humanitarian way. She just could not understand the hypocrisy she did see.* [Barb: *I see*] *Also, I think she came out of the womb a democrat, I don't know how that happened. I think everything she has felt and thinks is fully justified. It's okay to question [which joins me in the process of challenging her beliefs]. It is interesting how much our experiences really do shape our faith and our journeys and how we, where we end up.*

The praxis described here was oriented through either normative agreement OR through knowledge sharing positions. We mutually recognize one another through the norms and tacit knowledge claims which are linked to identity claims. Thus, as we take the norms to be valid, we simultaneously establish the validity of our agency in the acceptance of the norms. Likewise, as we accept the knowledge claims about the way things are, we accept how we are co-positioned through the knowledge claims. For example, Elizabeth correctly assumes that I share the values of humanitarianism and would consider hypocrisy to be problematic. In this joining, we are people who look for the genuine expression of faith in the engaged living of religious practitioners.

Praxis as Collaborative Insight

Sometimes there is a form of collaboration that has to do with getting on the same mind wave and collaboratively articulating new insights. Here is an example. Gina was talking about her conception of God during the first interview. At first, you can see she joins me with her in contrast with people who believe in a polymorphic God. Then, when I respond, I join back with her by sharing an immediate insight I garnered through my understanding of what she said. When I respond, I am voicing my own thinking in relation to hers. Talking with her produced this new insight, and I spoke of it right in the moment.

Gina: *And I think that's the spirit [Barb: The light (earlier she had used the word "light")] I think there's something, that's just there. That light. That light. I don't know it's really hard to explain, it's just there. It's a presence . . . it's like the spirit of who I am and and who other people are and, and, what's in the world. It's really hard to explain. It's really nebulous for me. I don't believe in this, um um, polymorphic kind of God . . . [Barb: light laughter (this is where a praxis joining occurs) . . . but, that there's something. A presence. A spirit. Or . . . And that's that's just who we are.*

Barbara: *I love that word presence that you use. Because also, you know, in Buddhist teaching there is this idea of being really present in the NOW. [Gina: uh-huh] And that idea of presence which I hadn't really thought about until you said it just then. But that idea of thinking about the present and the presence. [Gina: uh-huh and that Light is just something that is reflected from that. And we're in that presence. We're in the moment.]*

Praxis as collaborative insight involves the development of new perspectives through the conversation—perspectives that co-engage the participants. Praxis is associated with the emergent insight as co-produced. The insight resonates as an understanding that has opened into newness in

collaboration, together. These insights validate the progression of understanding in utero and illustrate the potentiality nestled there in understanding. The becoming of a new idea is simultaneously the becoming of those engaging with the ideas. Here validity is the praxis of potential, of what is to come should we understand one another thus far. I see catalytic validity of which Patti Lather speaks to rely on this kind of praxis.

Praxis as Alongsideness in Exploration

Many years ago, I took a co-counseling therapy course. One of the main lessons of the course was that when we are co-counseling, our most primary orientation is being with, being alongside, the Other. The idea here is that by being present with someone and exploring what is theirs to explore on their terms, we come along in the exploration and help to facilitate the multiple voices and perspectives involved in the conversation. The wisdom always rests in the hands of those for whom the explorations are personal (see http://cci-usa.org/what_is.php, for resources associated with co-counseling).

Remember Teresa? She was in her early 40s at the time of the interviews. The interviews coincided with a time in her life when she was questioning her faith. During the third interview, following a clip that illustrated a contradiction in her way of talking about truth, the following exchange happened:

Barbara: *It's interesting because um there's this idea of like universal truth that you brought up that is like anyone could believe it [Teresa: Yeah, you're right] and then this idea that there is something special [Teresa: Yeah] that only a certain group [Teresa: Right] could [Teresa: You're right. Nodding] and those two [Teresa: Yeah, they're polar opposites] they're contrasting. [Teresa: Yeah, they are]*

Teresa: *Yeah, so I was in a place where I was allowing those exceptions completely [Barb: Right]. And now I'm like no exceptions. We're done with that. (Laughs) [Barb: laughs with]*

Barbara: *But you do still have faith beliefs?*

Teresa: (Pause for 4 seconds) *Yes [Barb: You're not sure] Yes, but I don't know what in.*

Praxis in this form relates to the way in which the two of us explore alongside one another through agreement that the exploration itself is a valid act. Agreement is constituted through the process, not through the substance of the claims—So, above, we were not agreeing about whether or not Teresa held particular beliefs. In the above example, you can read that I am encouraging some exploration. The alongsideness is particularly visible in the way our talk co-mingles. In addition to the co-mingling form, the point of

exploration has that alongside structure to it as well. I encouraged the exploration by drawing on a contradiction in her earlier talk. We work to explore the best label (“polar opposites” or “contrasting”), but then, I feel a little uncertain about the exploration, and I don’t want to leave Teresa with that uncertainty, so I ask her whether she still has faith, beliefs—asking it in a way that leans toward “please let me know that you are okay.” I demonstrate my commitment to staying by her side as she asserts where there is uncertainty. Our praxis orientation was toward being supportive of each other’s exploring.

Conclusion?

To understand one another is a form of identity praxis because it means that we can mutually recognize the worthwhileness and validity of each other as persons. This is the deepest form of validity, perhaps what is most at stake when we interact. If you can go so far with me as to accept that research is a form of dialogue where the researcher is involved, then perhaps it isn’t too much further to see how that understanding linked to praxis. I am sure that there are many other ways to explore this idea of praxis as validity. This interview study seemed like a good place to start. Praxis is communicatively achieved in quite subtle ways. Sometimes, a laugh is involved, and, sometimes, a laugh means something completely different, like discomfort. One must understand the meaning of the interactions in subtle ways to get at this kind of validity.

Understanding is praxis securing. It is what validity of the sort I care about is, frankly, about. When we have a misunderstanding, we can acutely feel our need for praxis, our need for recognition through a repair. Locating our validity in the performance of research as internal to it will demand new ways of thinking about validity itself.

There are at least two ways in which this article takes a different approach to validity than is typical. First of all, there are few published studies that analyze validity from within the fieldwork of a qualitative study. Second, the more common way to think about researcher subjectivity in relation to the validity of the study emphasizes researcher reflection, but not the actual analysis of interactive data. Peshkin’s (1988) article is an example of the first. Peshkin advocates for researchers to reflect, but he does not call into the question the conceptual subtleties of validity with regard to researcher–subject–participants. I am just beginning to work out these ideas, and I expect them to change. In that spirit, I want to conclude this article with two questions:

- What is validated through researcher praxis?
- What are the ramifications of this conceptualization of validity for practices?

Last, I will offer a counter-example to leave us a bit at odds with the propositions I have made.

What Is Validated Through Researcher Praxis?

In qualitative inquiry, we have used the word *validity* to refer to the process of interpreting—that is, how valid are our interpretations of interactions and experiences given an insider set of perspectives (which would include the context, people, norms, and so forth). The interpretations themselves carry truth claims forward. Although first person agency is explicit in the statement itself (how valid are *our* interpretations of whatever it is we engage in through inquiry), we have not, as a research community, looked *very closely* at what it means to think about the validity of researcher positioning and interactions. What is validated through researcher praxis includes the following:

- The mutual understanding of persons as valid and worthwhile on the terms constituted through the interactions.
- The norms for engaging with one another.
- The interpretations of identity claims and their connections with norms and objectivity/facticity.
- The gist of the stories that are told and our mutual position-taking in reference to them.
- The researcher’s rapport, relationship, caring, and non-instrumental engagement with participants.

Following Habermas (1981/1984, for example), I notice that truth claims are grasped as validity claims because if we accept in practical terms that something is true, it is because we implicitly take the internal validity criteria of the claim to be satisfied. This happens primarily through the assumptions we make about the meaning of an action.

We can bring this back to our conceptualization of truth. If we accept that validity is an internal characteristic of truth and it is unavoidable to at least implicitly claim truth when we act meaningfully, then any statement about validity will also be a statement about conditions for claiming truth. Habermas’s critique of instrumental reason stands as a corrective for the idea that truth is equal to objectivity and that only that which is objective is counted as truth. We make subjective truth claims and normative truth claims as well. Each of which has its own internal validity criteria. By expanding the social science way of conceptualizing truth beyond positivism and post-positivism, we also expand the way in which we must and can conceptualize validity.

What Are the Ramifications of This Conceptualization of Validity for Practices?

Contemporary conversations about research validity among qualitative researchers freely acknowledge that the researcher is involved in establishing the validity. Generally, this is talked in categorical terms (e.g., creates an interview protocol or observation schedule that minimizes bias and maximizes understanding AND/OR locates one’s own positionality as

researcher within the context of the study). In addition to troubling the concept of validity from a post-positivist perspective, it might be a good idea for qualitative researchers to examine more closely the interpretive practices of their work for validity aspects. This article is just such an endeavor.

Moreover, in terms of the substantive contributions to our thinking about validity—each of the five praxis aspects were reconstructed across every one of the women’s interviews analyzed for this article. Perhaps this means they warrant more thought with respect to validity. The substantive aspects lodge their own critique of post-positivist validity by bringing the researcher-subject from the veiled margins into the center where her own identity claims and interpretive praxis can be examined. Doing this suggests that validity should be talked about in terms of the interpretive understanding that emerges. It should be complexly located throughout the process of engaging in research, with the complexity serving as potential reflection points. Moreover, these validity practices and ideas are amenable to a continued blurring between researcher and researched as we find enacted through Critical Participatory Action Research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), for example.

If our labor involves critical theories of meaning and social constructionist views of the Self, we might find the traditional orientations toward validity (the perpetuation of validity concepts which extract the researcher from the concept) to be problematic. If we are making interpretive claims about the lives, stories, and experiences of Others, we have to render an understanding of how those interpretations were located within the context they were offered up. It seems compelling to me that we should be willing to understand who the researcher is in the interactive context, and praxis connects the researcher and participants in a web of mutual understanding and social coordination.

A Counter-Example

During one of my interviews, one of the participants and I were having a challenging time understanding one another. It was during the second interview, and I asked her to talk about something she knew was true that did not depend on her particular religious beliefs. She had trouble thinking of something. There were long silences. I felt her growing discomfort and a surfacing feeling that she might think she was not “giving me” what I needed. I somehow felt as if this was my own bumbling fault, but I could not figure out how to rectify it. I also felt a lot of compassion for her in this awkwardness. I gave her the example of the truth claim “the earth is round,” and I asked her to talk about how she might justify that to someone who didn’t believe it was true. She was quiet. For a long time. It was uncomfortable. Again, I felt responsible, but also inadequate.

At other points during the interview process with her, including into the third interview, this particular participant diminished her own abilities saying things like, “I wish I

were more articulate” and “You sure wasted your tape there.” Although I tried to provide her with my own view that she has given wonderful explanations, told rich stories, provided me with a lot to think about, and told great stories, I doubt I ever really convinced her.

These are examples where praxis was not secured. Praxis always requires more than one’s self. If mutual recognition does not include the Other, praxis is jeopardized. If praxis is jeopardized, is validity also jeopardized? We might say that there were moments in the interview where rapport was strong and there were moments where rapport was weak if we want to talk about praxis in relation to rapport.

Missing Ethics?

A very astute reviewer acknowledged surprise that I had not said more about ethics in this article. “The attending ethico-onto-epistemological questions have to do with responsibility and accountability for the entanglements ‘we’ help enact and what kinds of commitments ‘we’ are willing to take on (including commitments to ‘ourselves’ and who ‘we’ may become)” (Barad, 2008, p. 333). Inherent in the idea of intra-action, as developed by Barad, is an ethical orientation. Kuntz (2015) argued, “Because I am forever in-relation, I have a responsibility to engage; I am never free to pretend a disassociated stance” (p. 73). My approach to validity is aligned with these notions of ethics. This approach to ethics is tucked into the practices of validity that I have articulated in this article. Praxis as a form of communicative, relational validity is an opportunity to behave ethically. Toward the very end of a chapter, I wrote on ethics and educational ethnography. I wrote,

The way we make claims to truth is necessarily at the heart of our conceptions of ethics . . . This is because our truth-claiming is always positioned and as such will necessarily and performatively indicate how we as subjects are de/centered in relation to the claim itself and in relation to others differentiated through the claim. The ways we [together] make claims to truth will be resourced and constrained by cultural structures, ideologies, power, and so on that must be examined and acted against/with as ethics . . . Because this “together” is dialogic it must freely and responsively include the other and difference. (Dennis, In Press)

Through a praxis, orientation to both validity and truth are performatively, intra-relationally established and such an orientation would have an internal ethical responsibility to the Self and Other.

Across each of the modes of recognition that are entailed in thinking of validity as praxis, the relation of Self and Other is an internal one. This means that the relation is not established external to the two entities as if they are wholly separate, but rather that the relation constitutes both inextricably. This has implications for how one thinks about ethics. New conversations linking validity and ethics might be possible through this way of thinking.

A Return

The purpose of the article was to illustrate a way of thinking about validity as praxis—and by default, as part of the practice of doing research, internal to those practices. There is an important shift here from validity concepts which are treated as external to the research process and the internal links I have tried to establish between truth, validity, and practice. In qualitative inquiry, there has been an intuitive recognition that the researcher's positionality is an aspect of the validity of the research project. My article should add details to this insight regarding the ways this positioning is entailed in the validity of the claims that are produced through our research labor. My goal was to open up a conversation about the communicative links of research practice and researcher praxis to research validity. In the spirit of thinking research as dialogue, let's talk.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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