

## Meaningful Member-Checking: A Structured Approach to Member-Checking

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### ABSTRACT

*Validity is essential to establish in any qualitative research study. There are numerous approaches to establish validity. One common technique utilized to establish validity is member-checking. The goal of member-checking is to provide credibility to the data (Elo et al., 2014). Member-checking is commonly conducted by presenting data transcripts to some or all participants for feedback (Varpio et al., 2017). This process is relatively easy and requires little effort from researchers and participants. However, this process has some weaknesses. One weakness is the information gathered during member-checking. Participants typically do not provide much feedback when reviewing transcripts, and therefore relying on this approach to establish validity is questionable. Member-checking is a valuable tool, but the approach should be more structured. This paper presents a structured approach, complete with interview questions and data analysis steps, to member-checking that minimizes the weaknesses and emphasizes the strengths.*

**KEYWORDS:** Member-checking, trustworthiness, validity, qualitative research, consistency.

### Qualitative Research History

Qualitative research is a widely accepted approach to inquiry in many fields (Varpio et al., 2017). Qualitative research was formally recognized around the 1970s with the dismissal of the quantitative-qualitative debate (Bailey, 2014; IvyPanda, 2019; Mohajan, 2018; Wertz, 2014). The field was established with definitions, journals, and textbooks dedicated to qualitative research (del Rio Carral & Tseliou, 2019). In the 1990s, researchers established formal designs leading to an increase in researchers conducting qualitative research. The growth was exponential over the next decades (Table 1). This table was created by the author to illustrate the growth of qualitative research.

The growth of qualitative research did not come without challenges. Researchers questioned the rigor and validity of the approach (Barusch et al., 2011; Davies & Dodd, 2002). The validity of qualitative research, including its strengths and weaknesses, will be discussed in depth later.

First, a definition of qualitative research should be established. Qualitative research is a study where data are collected from a small sample (usually a few participants) in the form of open-ended questions (Joubish et al., 2011; Tasker & Cisneroz, 2019). This includes studies where researchers interview participants and/or collect documents to review. Qualitative research seeks to gather an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons behind

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the behavior (Choy, 2014; Daniel, 2016). A goal of qualitative research is to provide insight into an established problem by answering the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of a phenomenon. Qualitative research is conducted in many fields but is popular in anthropology, sociology, social work, education, and nursing (Astin & Long, 2014; Schindler et al., 2020).

**Table 1**  
*Growth of Qualitative Research*

Range	Number of Publications
1970 – 1979	63
1980 – 1989	198
1990 – 1999	1,264
2000 – 2009	8,233
2010 – 2019	26,393

*Note.* Number of publications is based on a database search of published articles, including the word “qualitative” in the article’s title.

In qualitative research, the researcher views participants as the experts and the researcher as the learner. Qualitative research uses a bottom-up approach meaning the researcher seeks to explore a phenomenon in an unstructured way (Blaikie, 2018; Stevens & Palfreyman, 2012). Compared to quantitative studies, qualitative studies also tend to have smaller sample sizes and are more time-intensive (Dworkin, 2012; Sim et al., 2018). In qualitative researcher response options provided to participants are open-ended with the goal of eliciting a longer response than in quantitative studies. Qualitative research also utilizes numerous data collection techniques to interact with participants and collect data (Allen-Meares & Lane, 1990; Poerwandari, 2021) compared to quantitative studies.

### **Common Characteristics**

Qualitative research designs have quite a few common characteristics. Generally, qualitative research seeks to explore, describe, and understand concepts (Hays & McKibben, 2021; Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011). Since qualitative studies do not seek to generalize the results to a larger population, the focus is on explaining or understanding a concept or phenomenon (Westby, 2021). To explore or describe a phenomenon, researchers typically utilize in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations, and existing documents (Allen-Meares & Lane, 1990; Poerwandari, 2021). The focus lies on the individual (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007).

In qualitative studies, the design evolves as the study is conducted, and researchers remain flexible during data collection and analysis. Researchers commonly elicit more responses until saturation is reached (Stenfors et al., 2020). Qualitative studies are generally better for answering complex questions or questions not fully formed (Hamilton & Finley, 2019). Since qualitative research is adaptive, future questions depend on participants’ responses. This is a huge benefit for areas still developing or being understood (Berrios & Lucca, 2006).

Another common characteristic among qualitative research is the ethical issues researchers face (Shaw, 2008; Stenfors et al., 2020). Since data is commonly collected in natural settings, participants’ rights are important to consider (Damianakis & Woodford, 2012). Researchers need to consider access to participants, which may include seeking permission from a gatekeeper, building trust, and ensuring confidentiality (Shaw, 2008). Confidentiality is critical because participants often share personal stories, unpleasant experiences, or statements that can identify an individual (Kaiser, 2009). Researchers need to ensure participants cannot be identified in the final report of results/findings. Since many qualitative studies involve under-

represented groups, it is important that participants feel safe participating in the research (Hernando et al., 2018). Researchers must consider all these concerns prior to collecting data.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses**

Qualitative research, like all methodologies, has strengths and weaknesses. Strengths include the ability for participants to respond in their own words, for researchers to explore concepts little is known about, and to answer more complex questions.

Many researchers appreciate how qualitative research allows participants to express their own thoughts and opinions. Participants are not confined to a pre-determined response. Participants are able to share their thoughts and feelings in a manner authentic to them. Researchers are also able to ask participants exactly what they would like to know (Meyer & Schutz, 2020). In qualitative research, interview questions are not always set in stone. Questions can be asked based on participants' responses. The flexibility in responses and interview questions allows the researcher to explore a phenomenon they may know very little about. Horowitz (2010) stated, "One strength of qualitative research is the depth of information that it provides" (p. 239). For many fields, there is a need to understand complex ideas that cannot be answered with quantitative methods (Sofaer, 2002). This is possible when a researcher can ask questions as information unfolds, and participants are able to share their experiences in their own words.

While there are numerous strengths, qualitative research is not without weaknesses (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Guba, 1990; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Onwuegbuzie, 2000; Viadero, 1999). Some weaknesses include a lack of objectivity, generalizability (Kvale, 1992; Sim et al., 2018), and the time it takes to conduct a study (Anderson, 2010; Celestina, 2018). Researchers criticize qualitative research because some believe it lacks objectivity (Choy, 2014; Gelo et al., 2008; Nagel, 1986). In qualitative research, the researcher decides what data to highlight, and some believe this gives the researcher the opportunity to pick and choose what information will best suit his/her agenda. Quantitative researchers believe this leads to subjectivity in the inferences and conclusions of a qualitative study. Another critique of qualitative research is the lack of generalizability (Gelo et al., 2008; Vasileiou et al., 2018). Often qualitative studies have small samples meaning results cannot be generalized to the larger population as is possible with quantitative studies (Kvale, 1992). Researchers believe the lack of generalizability calls into question the usefulness of qualitative research (Vasileiou et al., 2018; Viadero, 1999). Qualitative research is also time-consuming. Researchers spend extensive time in the field collecting data. While prolonged time in the field develops richer data, the time spent can be challenging for researchers. Data analysis can also be time intensive. While some researchers may question the use of qualitative research, the strengths outweigh the weaknesses. Qualitative research allows researchers to answer complex questions with rich, detailed information, a valuable strength (Hughes et al., 2020; Meyer & Schutz, 2020).

### **Value**

The value of qualitative is immense (Astin & Long, 2014; Hughes et al., 2020; Meyer & Schutz, 2020). Qualitative research provides context and meaning. A researcher once said, "if the quantitative data represents the skeleton of an answer to the research questions, qualitative data gives it flesh" (Kirk, 2009). Utilizing interviews provides more insight into participants' experiences. This additional insight increases the understanding of a phenomenon. Qualitative methods can be used to understand an experience (e.g., experiencing a stroke) and participants' needs (Reed et al., 2010). This would not be easily measured by quantitative methodology.

Another value in qualitative research is related to validity. In qualitative research, researchers are able to provide a rich description of data collection and analysis (Daniel, 2016; Wright & Tolan, 2009). This description strengthens the trustworthiness of the methods and results. Researchers also integrate the voice of participants throughout their findings so readers get a sense of what was said and trust the findings. Integrating participants' voice is one common way to establish validity in the data analysis phase. This is critical in a field where subjectivity is questioned.

## Data Analysis

There are many qualitative designs. Some common ones include phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, narrative, and ethnography. Each of these designs may utilize different data analysis strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Sale, 2022; Tesch, 1990). Some researchers identify themes representing what participants shared (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), others present narratives capturing details of one's story (Butina, 2015), and others create artistic representations of the data (Balmer, 2021).

While the analytical strategies vary across designs, the common goal is to understand and construct meaning for a given phenomenon (Schiellerup, 2008). Generally, each qualitative design seeks to develop codes from the data sources, grouping the codes into themes, and then utilizing the data sources to support the themes (Daniel, 2016; Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011). When analyzing data, researchers may utilize software like Atlas.ti or MAXQDA (MacMillan & Koenig, 2004), or they may analyze by hand utilizing transcripts and existing documents (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

While each qualitative design can vary regarding data analysis characteristics and techniques, researchers commonly address validity or trustworthiness for each study (Elo et al., 2014). With the goal to represent the data in a meaningful and easy-to-understand manner, researchers must also ensure it is accurate. To address accuracy, researchers must discuss validity.

## Validity

Validity is the process by which researchers provide evidence that their findings are true (Guion et al., 2011; Jordan, 2018). Some researchers refer to validity as trustworthiness, credibility, or authenticity (Whittemore et al., 2001). Validity is not without its issues (Cho & Trent, 2006), but validity exists in qualitative research so researchers can generate hypotheses or concepts that other methodologies can test (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007). There are numerous types of validity; descriptive validity, theoretical validity, and interpretative validity (Johnson, 1997; Maxwell, 1992).

Descriptive validity "refers to the factual accuracy of the account reported by the qualitative researcher" (Johnson, 1997, p. 1). This includes key characteristics such as places, events, people, settings, and times. One technique used to obtain descriptive validity is triangulation. Triangulation involves using multiple sources of data to increase the validity of the findings (Guion et al., 2011).

Theoretical validity is the credibility of the theory developed from the findings and ensuring it fits the data collected (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Theoretical validity focuses on how and why the phenomenon operates. This validity is hard to establish and typically is achieved by spending extended time in the field. Researchers should spend ample time with participants and their settings (Johnson, 1997).

Interpretative validity deals with the accuracy of participants' viewpoints, thoughts, and experiences. It focuses on participants' feelings, intentions, and experiences, ensuring the meanings are captured. This ensures that when the audience is reading the findings, they see

and feel what the participant saw and felt (Johnson, 1997). Interpretative validity can be established using numerous rigorous techniques. One common technique is the use of quotations. Verbatim quotations provide a description and personal meaning. Another common technique is member checking. This article will focus on the technique of member checking.

## **Member-Checking**

Member-checking is a process where data transcripts are presented to some or all participants for feedback (Varpio et al., 2017). The goal of this process is to provide credibility to the data (Elo et al., 2014). Member-checking is viewed as another process where participants are involved in the research process (Birt et al., 2016).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) created the popularity around member-checking as a tool to establish credibility. Some researchers view member-checking as a way to correct errors and allow participants to eliminate any information they would prefer is not included (Thomas, 2017). Presenting transcripts to participants early on ensures the researcher has accurate data to analyze. This process helps eliminate the possibility of misrepresentation during the data analysis process (Candela, 2019).

While this approach is widely accepted and utilized, member-checking transcripts have some weaknesses (Carlson, 2010). When researchers elicit feedback from participants regarding the transcripts, typically, very little information is gained from participants. Some participants may not even respond to the request to review their transcript (Stake, 1995). The lack of response could be due to the fact that transcripts are not exciting to review or because participants feel they have nothing new to add. Another concern when utilizing this approach is the stress of reliving an unpleasant experience that was hard to talk about the first time. Since qualitative research can also involve sensitive topics, reviewing transcripts causes participants to relive the traumatic event again. Reliving a traumatic experience may be another reason participants are less likely to respond to a request to review a transcript.

When considering the method of reviewing a transcript, researchers should also consider the time needed. For participants, it takes time to read through a transcript to ensure the interview has been correctly transcribed (Candela, 2019). If the researcher has transcribed the interviews, the researcher should be able to ensure everything was captured accurately in the transcript. If the researcher is concerned something is missing in the transcripts, he/she could review the audio/visual data materials again to ensure the transcripts are an accurate representation of the data collected. If an outside party was asked to transcribe the interviews, the researcher could still ensure transcription was accurate by re-listening the interview. Not only would this ensure accuracy, but it would also serve as a first step in the data analysis process, familiarizing yourself with the data (Nowell et al., 2017).

As mentioned earlier, some researchers also use reviewing transcripts to allow participants to modify or eliminate something that was stated (Candela, 2019). An opportunity to review a personal experience or narrative is critical and honors the integrity of qualitative research. This can be critical when working with underrepresented groups. However, asking participants to review the transcripts for the possible elimination of information can be misleading. A participant is not able to see how their story or experience will be presented to readers, only how it appears in the transcript. When one participant's information is woven together with other participants' experiences, it may be presented in a way that no longer identifies an individual, and a participant may not wish to eliminate the information. Transcripts can be very identifiable. When the data is compiled together, participants' stories are still real and raw but oftentimes less identifiable.

There is no argument that member checking is an extremely valuable tool (Candela, 2019; Harper & Cole, 2012). It has commonly been achieved by asking participants to review their transcripts (Carlson, 2010; López-Zerón et al., 2021). While this can provide additional

clarification, participants are also less likely to provide feedback on a transcript because they were present during the interview, and re-reading transcripts is not exciting. Reading the transcripts is also something the researcher should do to ensure transcripts are accurate. Member checking is still critical, and this paper will present a stronger approach to member-checking.

### **New Member-Checking Approach**

Member checking is an extremely valuable tool and speaks to the core characteristic of qualitative research; the participant is the expert (Knapik, 2006). However, the expertise of participants should be utilized to its fullest. Since participants are viewed as experts, participants should be asked to provide input into the findings. The findings are what audience members will actually read, and therefore the weight of the findings is far greater than the transcripts. Once the researcher has a strong draft of the findings (including all direct quotations), participants should be asked to provide input. This approach allows participants' expertise to be utilized in a way that benefits the final product. Participants are also much likelier to read a findings section as they can see the integration of their story or experience with other participants' stories. This integration is new and likely something that would be of interest to a participant. When reviewing findings, participants also have the ability to clarify quotes or summaries from their interviews. If a participant feels the researcher has not conveyed their experience correctly, they can provide feedback the researcher can address in the revision of the findings.

Since qualitative research involves sensitive issues (Fahie, 2014; Pinto et al., 2022), providing participants with the findings also allows a participant to request information be removed or made more anonymous prior to being available to a larger audience. This is critical for direct quotations the researcher may include from the transcripts. Direct quotations could cause a participant to be easily identified, whereas a summary may not leave a participant feeling exposed. By providing the participants with the findings, including direct quotations, the participant can visually see how readers will view their stories or experiences. Again, the information shared with the participants should reflect what would be shared with readers.

While providing participants with the findings and asking for comments is a valuable approach, a more structured approach would lead to greater value. The following questions are proposed as a way to conduct meaningful member checking. When sending the findings to participants, the researchers should conduct a brief 10–15 minute interview addressing the following questions. These questions could also be sent to participants prior to the interview, so they are able to reflect prior to the interview. Below are the member-checking interview questions:

1. After reading through the findings, what are your general thoughts?
2. How accurately do you feel the findings captured your thoughts/experiences?
3. What could be added to the findings to capture your experiences better?
4. If there is anything you would like removed, what would that be and why?

### ***Value in a New Approach***

These interview questions provide researchers with a structured approach for participants to provide feedback. The questions also seek to answer what is missing, which strengthens the study's findings. These questions really emphasize the participants' expertise. The reason why researchers conduct qualitative research is that they view the participants as the expert (Knapik, 2006). Participants' expertise should be maximized not only in data collection but also in data analysis and representation. The findings are what is presented to readers and how the participants will be portrayed, so presenting the findings to participants for

review is critical. Including participants in the write-up is another way to empower them and have them take on a more “researcher” role.

Asking participants if there is anything they would like removed is critical to strengthening the researcher/participant relationship. In qualitative research, participants share sensitive, identifying information (Fahie, 2014; Pinto et al., 2022). By ensuring participants see what you will be presenting to readers before publication, it allows participants to ask to have something removed or de-identified. As researchers, we want to ensure we never damage the relationship between researchers and participants. In qualitative research, it is not uncommon to need permission from a gatekeeper or be working with under-representative groups (McFadyen & Rankin, 2016; Renert et al., 2013). If in this situation, it is important for researchers to utilize the structured approach presented above as it builds trust. Trust is important because participants may have had negative experiences previously, and participating in research can be scary or intimidating. Creating a space for a conversation among participants helps not only the current relationship but also increases future willingness to participate in research.

### ***Integrating Feedback***

When conducting the new member-checking method presented above, researchers should try to follow up with at least half of the participants, ideally, all participants would agree to participate. After member checking has been completed with participants who agree to participate, researchers should reflect on the feedback. The reflection should start with the last question asked. Priority should be given to any information a participant has requested be removed. This request should be honored, and the information should be eliminated from the findings. Once eliminated, the researcher should refer to the responses provided for question one. Responses received on question one should be reviewed across all participants. After reviewing all responses, the researcher should reflect on this information and use the information to help with interpreting questions two and three. After reviewing responses to question one, researchers should proceed with responses to question two. If participants generally feel their experiences and thoughts were captured, the researcher may not have many revisions. However, if participants felt their experiences and thoughts were not fully captured, the researcher should move on to question three. Question three should be used to enhance and validate their findings. Researchers may need to integrate additional information that captures the participants’ experience into the themes, essence, or description. While it may seem impossible to go back after data analysis to integrate more findings, it is critical that participants’ experiences and stories are accurately captured.

Utilizing a member-checking approach where findings are presented to participants, and an interview is conducted increases the validity of the findings. Researchers should ensure they detail this member-checking process in the final manuscript. Researchers should highlight how participants were included and how their expertise was drawn to strengthen the findings. If the participants did not provide much new information in the member-checking process, that should also be mentioned, so readers have additional faith in the findings. If significant changes were made, the changes should be detailed as well.

### **Conclusion**

Validity is critical in qualitative research. Validity provides readers with information on what procedures were taken to ensure the findings presented accurately reflect participants’ responses. One common validity technique is member checking. Traditionally member checking is conducted by presenting the transcripts to participants for accuracy. While this technique strengthens the validity of a study, presenting transcripts to participants has some



weaknesses. Structuring the member-checking approach can eliminate these weaknesses. Presented above is a member-checking technique where findings are presented to participants accompanied by four structured questions. This process can be used in various settings, including but not limited to education, psychology, sociology, and medical studies. Any qualitative study that involves the use of focus groups or interviews could be strengthened with the use of a structured member-checking approach.

This methodology would also apply to all qualitative designs and analysis approaches. This approach would also work well for researchers collaborating with others. When researchers collaborate with others, they may use inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater reliability allows researchers to compare the application of codes to ensure researchers are coding similarly (Armstrong et al., 1997). Utilizing the member-checking approach above allows researchers to have extra confidence in their findings when multiple researchers are coding the data. The structured member-checking approach allows researchers to maximize participants' expertise, strengthen the relationship with participants, and ensure the findings accurately reflect participants' experiences.

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### Notes on Contributor

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