

## Validity in qualitative research: Interview and the appearance of truth through dialogue

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**Abstract:** This paper addresses several issues related to validity in qualitative research and, more specifically, explores the ways in which validity has been discussed and applied in research with qualitative interviews. The central question is to what extent, if at all, traditional positivist validity criteria are applicable, but also relevant, for evaluation of research with qualitative interviewing. The qualitative interview has been chosen as the focal point of this paper because of its peculiarity in terms of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee or, in other words, the ways in which during an interview meaning and narrative are constructed through discourse between the participants. The importance of the relationship (with its characteristics) between research participants (interviewer and interviewee) for the outcome of a qualitative interview cannot be overemphasized and is as such of particular interest for the assessment of its validity. I introduce and summarize the main approaches to the study and establishment of validity and scrutinize their significance for the example of qualitative interviewing and research in particular. This paper shows the importance of considering research context (in this instance interview) for any assessment of validity, if validity at all ought to assume the same role in qualitative and quantitative research. As alternatives to the positivist notion of validity concepts such as reflexivity, transparency and credibility throughout the research process are introduced and advocated.

**Key words:** validity, qualitative research, interviews quality criteria

## Veljavnost v kvalitativnem raziskovanju: Intervju in pojavljanje resnice skozi dialog

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**Povzetek:** Pričujoči prispevek obravnava vprašanje veljavnosti v kvalitativnem raziskovanju. Osredotoča se na preiskovanje načinov obravnave in uporabe pojma veljavnosti v raziskovanju s kvalitativnim intervjujem. Glavno vprašanje je, do kakšne mere (če sploh) so tradicionalni pozitivistični kriteriji veljavnosti uporabni in relevantni za ovrednotenje takšnega raziskovanja. Kvalitativni intervju je bil izbran kot fokus zaradi svoje specifičnosti v smislu odnosa med tistim, ki intervjuja in intervjuvanim, kakor tudi zaradi načinov, kako v času samega intervjuja pomeni in narativi nastajajo skozi dialog med sodelujočima. V tem kontekstu ni nikdar preveč poudarjeno, kako pomembna sta za izid kvalitativnega interjuja odnos med sodelujočima in njegov značaj. Ta odnos je še posebej

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zanimiv v povezavi z vprašanjem ocenjevanja njegove veljavnosti. V prispevku predstavljam in povzemam glavne pristope k obravnavi in vzpostavljanju veljavnosti ter ocenjujem njihovo pomembnost in aplikativnost za primer kvalitativnega intervjuja. Pričujoča razprava pokaže nujnost upoštevanja raziskovalnega konteksta (v tem primeru intervjuja) za kakršno koli oceno veljavnosti, seveda le v primeru, če naj ima veljavnost kot taka zares enako vlogo tako v kvalitativnem kot v kvantitativnem raziskovanju. Kot alternativa pozitivističnemu pojmu veljavnosti so predstavljeni pojmi refleksivnosti, transparentnosti in kredibilnosti.

**Ključne besede:** veljavnost, intervjuji, kvalitativno raziskovanje, kriteriji kakovosti

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Cronbach and Meehl first introduced the issue of validity in quantitative research in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century in relation to the establishment of the criteria for assessing psychological tests (Kvale, 1996). Validity has been linked to the notion of psychometrics and has often served as an argument for disqualification of qualitative research, claiming that qualitative research is not scientific since it does not meet the required objective quality criteria. The question of validity in qualitative research together with notions such as reliability and generalizability falls under a wider theme of quality of research. The importance of determining general criteria of validity within qualitative research relates to the quest for establishing qualitative methods as an autonomous research tradition (Gaskell & Bauer, 2000), not disregarded by scientists within the quantitative positivist tradition. Several discourses have developed in defence against such attempts of disqualification of qualitative methods. Although categorized somewhat differently in the literature on validity of qualitative research, these discourses converge roughly into three broad areas; firstly, direct application of validity from quantitative to qualitative research, secondly, outright rejection of validity and its importance and, thirdly, the development of separate but somewhat correspondent criteria of validity for qualitative research. The whole dispute basically extends from a polarity of positivist reification to a complete humanistic rejection of validity in social research (Flick 2002; Kvale, 1989; Kvale 1996) and has also been characterized as a dispute between objectivism and relativism, realism and idealism, or deduction and induction (Seale, 1999). Some of these ideas are presented in the present paper in order to gain a better understanding of different meanings and understandings of validity, and to be able to discuss this issue more in depth in relation to qualitative interviewing.

## **Validity: positivism vs. relativism**

In traditional quantitative terms validity refers to whether an instrument actually measures what it intends to measure or whether it gives the correct or truthful

answer (Kirk & Miller, 1986). There exist numerous kinds of validity (e.g. construct, external and internal validity); definitions and significance of these can be found in any introductory research methods textbook. The search for validity in this positivist epistemological approach can be considered as the search for truth. This view is aligned with the simple correspondence principle or the theory of truth, where the data and the results are supposed to simply reflect the reality existing 'out there'. This account is disputable if the notion of a stable reality existing 'out there' is challenged. The positivist account is countered by social constructivists, who claim that social reality is socially constructed and does not simply exist 'out there' to be measured by an objective scientist. The social constructivist account is devoid of the belief in objective reality or objective knowledge of the world.

The difference between the two accounts, the positivist and the constructivist, is in the way the nature of the relationship between the human mind and the world is conceived. In other words, the basic question is, whether (scientific) knowledge is a social construction stemming out of conversation or human communication or it is a pure reflection of reality, not influenced by the observer. In contrast to the positivist account, social constructivists emphasize the possibility of alternative interpretations and contestable truths. They stress uniqueness of each individual to the extent that sometimes the comparison between different social worlds becomes difficult. It seems as if the only mind one can eventually get to know is his or her own (Seale, 1999). This, as it is argued by the critics, potentially results in solipsism since communication between different social actors is rendered impossible and there remain "no grounds on which to construct a common language for scientific statements, let alone judge their quality" (Seale, 1999, 24). Pure rejection, as such radical constructivist approach is also called, argues that issues such as sampling, reliability, and validity are 'positivist' criteria, which cannot be applied to qualitative research (see for example Agar, 1986; Wolcott, 1990). According to this account, there is no sense in establishing validity in qualitative research as the search for 'truth' itself makes no sense.

Such relativist account is completely dismissed by many social scientists since it is argued that it does not contribute to further establishment of any quality and credibility of qualitative research, but also renders results of social scientific studies irrelevant for the community (Flick, 2002). However, is it really the case that individual and his or her unique stories and narratives tell us nothing about the social realities and the lives of the people? Does the alleged inability of generalization render such studies irrelevant? Simply dismissing these accounts as completely irrelevant is at least counter-productive, if not wrong. The suggestion is to take a stand between the two extremist positions, irrespective of how difficult and/or acceptable this may be.

## The 'Golden Mean'

In order to get over the predicaments of the extreme positions presented above, numerous researchers have engaged in reinterpretation, reformulation and reproduction of validity criteria in qualitative research (see for example Lather, 1993; Merrick, 1999). As indicated above this is a rather broad area, ranging from the development of completely new standards and meanings of validity to a sort of translation and adaptation of validity and its meanings into quantitative terms<sup>1</sup>. It is very true that "a sometimes bewildering variety of new concepts confronts any reviewer of this field of methodological writing" (Seale, 1999, p. 43). As argued by Seale (1999, p. 43), this proliferation of concepts definitely reflects "the difficulties which qualitative methodologists have had in making their ideas 'stick'".

### Looking for Ways to Approach Validity

Almost every book on qualitative research methods includes a chapter dealing with issues such as validity, generalizability, reliability and other allegedly important research criteria. Most of them do not go much farther than attempting to briefly summarize different accounts of what these criteria refer to and how to achieve them (e.g. Payne, 1999; Silverman, 2001). The products are recipe-like chapters containing numerous techniques and criteria often without any real substance or examples of how this or that criterion should be achieved in practice. Fortunately, there are also other researchers, who approach this problem from a little more systematic (Gaskell & Bauer, 2000) and/or theoretical point of view (Hammersley, 1990; Kvale, 1996).

### Validity and Truth

As already mentioned, validity is often defined in terms of 'truth'. Using the notion of truth or true knowledge in research on social phenomena seems to be rather problematic. It presupposes that there is a 'pure form of truth' somewhere out there, which can be discovered through using appropriate and most importantly valid research methods. However, if this 'truth' or true knowledge is of a social and contextual nature and, consequently, contested or constructed all the time then validity in terms of the positivist tradition cannot be an appropriate quality measure. Defining validity on the basis of true knowledge or in relation to a reality existing 'out there' is different from saying that "the issue of what is valid knowledge involves the philosophical question of what is truth" (Kvale, 1996, p. 238).

A more theoretical approach to validity is presented by Kvale (1996), who focuses on the social constructions of validity in interviews. Like other authors he is trying to overcome the opposition of two extremes: the quest for pure objectivity and

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<sup>1</sup>Also referred to as "abstracted functional equivalence" (Gaskell & Bauer, 2000, 349).

true meaning one the one hand, and subjective relativism on the other. He stresses the interdependence of philosophical understandings of truth, social scientific concepts of validity, and practical issues emerging in verifying interview knowledge. He ironically refers to generalizability, validity and reliability as the ‘holly trinity’ in science and reminds the audience how these criteria have been used by many researchers to disqualify qualitative research. For him, issues of validity in psychological research, or in interviewing more specifically, are importantly related to the conceptualizations of knowledge and truth. Moreover, he stresses that there are multiple ways of knowing as well as multiple truths. One could also argue on the basis of this account that there exist as many truths as interpretations and/or interpreters. The problem with the concept of validity in this context is that it necessarily implies a firm boundary between what is true and what is false; however, from this point of view, it is impossible to establish a firm boundary between what is true and what is not. Kvale, by rejecting the notion of an objective universal truth, does not reject the existence of specific local, personal, and community forms of truth, or of facts themselves.

If we proceed from this, valid qualitative research is about credibly representing different social worlds or different interpretations to the readers. Whenever using the notion of validity, which always corresponds to a truth of some kind, we necessarily have to be explicit about our view of what truth refers to. In this paper truth is considered to be constituted through dialogue and hence the quest for absolute and certain knowledge does not represent the final aim of validation. It is replaced by a notion of defensible knowledge claims. Valid knowledge claims come from conflicting interpretations (and not from the ‘things themselves’), which are negotiated and agreed upon by individuals in a particular society or by members of a community<sup>2</sup> (Kvale, 1996; Sciarra, 1999). Unfortunately, such explanation does not provide sufficient grounds for understanding specifically and more practically how validity is related to qualitative interview. To see what determines their validity we, therefore, need to look at interviews as such more closely. In other words, the point here is not to approach validity as such (decontextualized validity ‘*an sich*’) but validity in a concrete context of social research at the level of interviewing.

## Qualitative Interview and Narrative

The debate about truth and validity becomes especially complex in types of research where the impact of the researcher or the observer, the situation and other variables is very evasive and context dependent. Particularly interesting in this sense are interviews, such as semi-structured and narrative interviews. Such qualitative interviews are understood as interactions between two (or more), usually previously

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, it ought to be mentioned that the question of power remains not only unresolved but completely untouched upon due to the limits and scope of this paper.

unacquainted individuals, who through a long series of communicative acts together construct meaning. Each of the participants is considered to have his or her own perspective and social knowledge; however, they have to share some sort of common ground, which allows them to communicate the meaning somehow through their 'in-betweenness'. Interview, moreover, is a dyadic interaction that is situated in a specific, mostly face-to-face context<sup>3</sup> and in specific time (Payne, 1999). Through the interview the researcher seeks to understand the meaning of phenomena from the interviewee's perspective. The decisive point in this context is not the meaning of the phenomena as such (the reality 'out there') but rather the perspective of the interviewee with regard to at least two 'things': firstly, regarding 'the thing' being asked (this or that question) and, secondly, the perspective of the interviewee in the sense of the kind of meaning he or she is 'investing' in it (through the explication of his or her perspective). In this sense the interview touches upon the subjective worlds of interviewed individuals, tries to enter and understand them by means of focusing on the production of meaning. If qualitative interview is understood as a joint venture of the interviewer and the interviewee, a dialogue or discourse (Mishler, 1986) between two participants, with an uncertain outcome in the sense of 'meaning' or truth, how can we assess its validity?

### **The Social Psychology of the Interview**

To address the issue of validity in relation to the interview, we need to be aware of what exactly happens during an interview situation. Farr (1982) in his article *'Interviewing: the social psychology of the interview'* argues that there ought to be a theory behind every interview encounter. Such a theory needs to incorporate psychological as well as social factors and needs to be a theory of the human self at the same time. Only this kind of approach can ensure one to really understand the actions and experience of the interviewer and the interviewee. Farr refers to interviews as "inter-views" in order to emphasize the social and relational nature of this encounter and to stress that a purely psychological approach might not be able to account for such a type of social encounter. Situational, cultural and other influences need to be taken into account. According to Farr, an important aspect in interview situation is the difference in perspective between the actor and the observer.<sup>4</sup> This relates to the distinction between self and other. What one also needs to recognize, are the different social (traditional, cultural, political, religious etc.) worlds of the participants, which engage in a dialogue during each interview situation. An interview is

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<sup>3</sup> Interview can also be conducted through e-mail, phone or mail but this, however, this does not significantly change its elementary diadic dimension, even if not conducted face-to-face.

<sup>4</sup> However, one could argue against Farr's distinction of 'actor' and 'observer' since by taking seriously the 'dialogic' nature of the interview it is not possible to strictly distinguish between active and passive interview participants.

peculiar in the sense that it usually lasts a limited amount of time and is set up for a particular purpose, namely, that of understanding the other's point of view and then interpreting it. Obviously the emphasis is, again, not on the 'thing itself' but on the point of view and the meaning production. Meaning (and validity), in other words, are not pre-given but constructed through the process of interviewing. It needs to be stressed that in such a situation there is always and necessary a part of knowledge or meaning that is by definition not communicated. This is so either because of the way something is expressed by the narrator or the way it is misinterpreted or overheard by the interviewer. Finally, this is also the case since it is impossible to question 'everything' within the time-limited frame of an interview.

In an interview situation the interviewer and the interviewee assume particular roles, and, according to Farr (1982), they both alternate between the role of actor and observer, or speaker and listener. Especially the interviewers need to be aware of how they influence the person they are interviewing. Being aware that one is the object in the social world of the other (which is, first of all, possible by being able to see self as the 'object') leads one "to become 'apprehensive' as to how those others might evaluate them" (Farr, 1982, 154). This represents the basic theory behind the influence of the interviewer or what is sometimes in more positivistic terms called the 'interviewer bias'. Such influence might also result from other sources, for instance, where the interview is being conducted. However, the most significant influences are the interviewer's characteristics. Some of them are relatively unchangeable, such as gender, age and ethnicity (Payne, 1999). Furthermore, interviewer's appearance like the style of clothing or the accent also carry meanings for the interviewee and are thus potential source of influence as well as clear markers of social status and power (Payne, 1999). All of these can to a great extent influence the interviewee as well as the process and the direction of the interview itself. These seem to be especially important in cases of research on delicate topics such as for example research with people of different ethnicities or with immigrant population. An important feature is that, what is told is always communicated to a particular 'other' and, accordingly, it might have taken a completely different direction, if someone else were the listener. In this sense there is no possibility to have twice the same interview. An interview is by definition THE interview! This interview is hence intrinsically irreversible, unrepeatable, unique and singular.

Depending on how highly structured an interview originally is, it might take almost innumerable directions. This depends on the way the interviewer and the interviewee convey what they want to say, what can or could be said in a particular situation and also on the way this is accepted or understood by the 'other'. Here, I think, emerge two important concerns for the interviewer. Namely, the awareness of how one presents oneself, as well as how one is understood and perceived by the interviewee. Thus it is important for the interviewer to look at himself from the eyes of the interviewee or the 'other' in general and try to understand how one is being

perceived and how relevant this is or could be. Self reflection is a very difficult task as one can never completely step out of his or her mind, not to speak about stepping out of one's body. Nevertheless, an interviewer should always aim to be conscious of his or her actions and appearance and the influence these might exert. Nevertheless, this should never be done at the expense of spontaneity, which, as I would like to argue here, is a very important interviewer skill in terms of enhancing rapport between the participants and in such ways increasing interviewee's trust and ease with the interviewer.

Finally, since an interview is a joint venture and a re-construction and re-thinking of one's memories or even one's self to some extent, it leaves a certain mark on the participants and in a sense changes them. In an interview people think and talk about issues, they reconstruct their particular life histories and narratives. Furthermore, people present different versions of their stories or selves to different people and they also elaborate and adjust them in the light of the present (Bruner, 1994). Here 'present' is not to be understood in terms of absolute time, but in the sense of the presently, newly (re)constructed meaning presented through the interview exchange.

### **Validity as a Process**

How does all of the above relate to the initial concern with validity in qualitative interviewing? One the whole, one cannot really determine a specific stage when validity should or could be assessed in an interview. Instead, it should be addressed throughout the entire research process (Flick, 2002; Gaskell & Bauer, 2000; Kvale, 1996; Merrick, 1999). Perhaps, as I would suggest, we can distinguish four stages of the process, although most researchers focus mostly on two. Firstly, production of data is considered as one aspect for judging validity and, secondly, data presentation and interpretation as the other aspect. In other words, there is a difference in assessing validity of the method and the validity of interpretations. This is the reason why it is so important to look at the whole research process when we think about its validity. Next to the production of data and interpretation I would like to stress also the process of preparation and the transcription of verbal data. Although these might seem trivial, they nonetheless importantly contribute to the research process and its validity. By preparation I mean the importance of understanding the theory behind the interview<sup>5</sup>, the mastery of the theoretical background behind the research topic on the part of the researcher, the reflexive stance and the explication of the epistemological issues behind the theory. The researcher also needs to acknowledge how much of potentially important information might be lost in the transformation of verbal into written data. For example, gestures and body language that the interviewer

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<sup>5</sup> Grounded theory with its stress on the production of theory directly from data represents an exception in this case (Strauss, 1987).



might have observed during the interview, or expressions of specific emotions, such as laughing or crying.<sup>6</sup>

After interview transcription, analysis and interpretation take place – probably the most crucial part of the research process. We have established that the researcher is not looking to capture the reality ‘out there’, but is instead aiming at understanding what and how the interviewee is experiencing from the ways he or she conveys this to the interviewer. In other words, he is aiming at taking the position of the ‘other’ and, through this, understanding what and how this other is trying to say. Completely capturing what the other means or how the other understands the world or self appears impossible. Perhaps this is the closest possible solution to the question of validation in traditional quantitative sense. Not only is there always some information that is not communicated, but every interpretation of data is influenced by researcher’s pre-constructed theories and values (Seale, 1999). This relates to the argument that any data collected from an interview are highly selective and subjective<sup>7</sup>. Most researchers suggest that the interviewer should strive to eliminate his or her influence and, furthermore, “make explicit to readers what this personal perspective is, so that readers can make their own judgements about the extent to which it has influenced the text (a strategy sometimes referred to as ‘reflexivity’)” (Seale, 1999, 26).

## Alternative Criteria

In addition to evaluating validity of qualitative research as a process, application of alternative criteria has been proposed in the literature on qualitative methods. This, for instance, is emphasized by Merrick (1999), who considers trustworthiness and reflexivity as important concerns, which guide a qualitative researcher in his or her pursuit of quality qualitative research. Validity is not a property of the research tool in qualitative methods and, for Merrick, it depends on the relationship a researcher establishes with the research process as well as with the interpretative community. By saying this, it is acknowledged that the role of the researcher is central in both, the ‘production of knowledge’ as well as in assuring the validity of the whole process.

Consequently, reflexivity and transparency become the most important concerns of the researcher. This refers to the reflexivity on the part of the researcher in the sense of being conscious of his or her actions, development of the process, but also trying to see “what frames our seeing – spaces of constructed visibility and incitements to see which constitute power/knowledge” (Merrick, 1999, 34). In

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<sup>6</sup>This is partly overcome by use of specific transcription symbols for non-verbal and non-worldly phenomena, which nevertheless does not completely answer the problem of transmission from speech to language, from ‘living’ to ‘dead’ words, from dialogical to monological and structure. Although this represents an extremely important point it is impossible to elaborate and develop it within the scope of the present paper.

<sup>7</sup>However, one can also claim this for any other kind of scientific research since it is always conducted by humans, who can never be objective; they always engage in research from their own perspective, with their convictions and private motives.

a similar manner, Flick (2002) focuses on issues of trustworthiness, credibility and dependability as alternative criteria. Whether or not a particular interview is valid is basically not the right question. Flick (2002) argues in relation to sampling and representativeness that the question, whether a sampling method is appropriate can only be judged in relation to the research problem. In line with this, in the case of an interview, it is almost senseless to establish criteria for validity or quality of qualitative research in general, since these very much depend on the research question as well as, for example, the generalizations one is aiming at. In sum, qualitative research and its methods cannot be judged solely on the basis of their validity a priori, but with regards to their appropriateness for the topic and their embeddedness in the research process (Flick, 2002).

## Conclusion

Researcher reflexivity (and subsequent writing-up transparency) throughout the whole research process have definitely been shown to be the primary concerns of the researcher. Overall, rather than eliminating the effects of the interviewer in a qualitative interview setting, we should try to control them. In Bourdieu's (1999) words, we should strive to reduce the 'symbolic violence' which is inherent in every interview relationship and try to enhance 'conditions of non-violent communication'. However, we should not think that simply by virtue of reflexivity and transparency, the researcher "can ever completely control the multiple and complex effects of the interview relationship" (Bourdieu, 1999, 615). Consequently, it is questionable whether it is sensible to stick to the quantitative notion of validity, or same quality criteria in general, when evaluating such research.

Concerning my initial question pertaining to the validity of qualitative interview, it appears difficult and perhaps unnecessary to establish a sort of general criteria for validity. Even within types of interviewing there are significant differences. Of course there exist several common concerns; nevertheless, more emphasis should be placed on the differences between methods and how validity is inherent in the correspondence and appropriateness of a particular methodology for a chosen topic. Moreover, since validity is not solely a property of the research tool it is also much related to the researcher and how he or she conducts research. The procedural nature of validity is emphasized, which ought to encompass much more than simply tell us whether the research tool is actually 'measuring' what it intends to measure. It appears from the above presented that different subject matters require different research methods and that quality of a particular method (or its validity) cannot be judged a priori (at least not in qualitative approaches). Validity is hence not something inherent in the method, what matters is on which grounds and for what subject a particular method is used. This ought to be taken together with researcher's understandings of the theory behind the interview (or a particular method) and his or her epistemological

and self-reflective stance. Validity, if it ought to retain the same name in qualitative research, refers to all steps of a research process separately and is hence manifold and multi-dimensional. It is constructed and reconstructed through the researcher's engagement and relationship with his or her research interests and topics.

Although it seems that today's qualitative researchers or so called 'criteriologists' agree to be somewhere between extreme positions of positivism and relativism, there is still little agreement concerning the criteria for validity and other concepts related to quality in qualitative research. Especially the proliferation of numerous accounts and guidelines shows that very few of them have been truly accepted on the whole. There are several reasons why qualitative researchers are struggling with the notion of validity. This is because of the heterogeneity of different methods within the field, high dependence of the applicability of criteria on the research topic and because of the importance of the whole research process for establishing its overall quality. Nevertheless, there still remains the question why would quantitative and qualitative methods need to strive for the same sort of criteria, if they differ significantly.

The insistence on using the same criteria for validity, or at least semantically and functionally equivalent ones, in qualitative and quantitative methods, is perhaps due to the fact that today's society and scientific tradition are still very much inclined to the exaltation of 'objective' science and thus prefer quantitative methods over qualitative ones. Some qualitative researchers hence strive toward similar quality criteria for their research to be more accepted or perhaps 'scientific'. If qualitative methods are to become independent and important tools for approaching our worldly reality without losing touch with the worldly experience, we should perhaps stubbornly insist on autonomous criteria (or better 'guiding ideals' or 'enabling conditions' as suggested by Seale, 1999) and not exhibit doubts about the quality of our own methods. More concern with the actual quality, instead of the concern with the acceptance in the mainstream science, is surely an important step towards the desired autonomy.

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