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Dangers of Member Checking

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INTRODUCTION

Member checking has been posited as a fundamental aspect of qualitative research. The process involves “taking data and interpretations back to participants in the study so they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). Whereas quantitative scholars run tests and measure standard errors to justify the importance of a study, qualitative scholars persuade readers to accept findings by employing different strategies. Allowing participants the opportunity to review data and findings has the potential of increasing a study’s validity and trustworthiness. Scholars working with underserved, marginalized, or invisible populations have also considered member checking as one method of giving participants a voice in the research process (Doyle, 2007; Duneier, 1999).

Member checking has become part of qualitative research courses and discussions of “best practices” without much theorizing concerning how participants experience this practice. The majority of discussions involve how the process influences the findings with little thought to the impact on participants. Member checking is probably most dangerous for early scholars who follow “rules” explicitly without critically considering the implications (Carlson, 2010). This chapter explores the potential dangers of asking participants to review (or re-live) the data collected. The overarching question I confront is: what unexpected harms could result from member checking? Drawing from studies conducted with marginalized youth, I discuss the implications associated with providing participants with an opportunity to review findings. In particular, I consider the harms that may result when a trusted individual (i.e., the researcher) asks a participant to review material that suggests negative future outcomes.

My intent is not to discard member checking, but rather I argue that it is a complex social process that warrants careful consideration before being employed. In the sections that follow I provide an overview of member checking and how the process fits within arguments about “validity” and “trustworthiness” in qualitative research. I then outline harms I encountered...
while conducting member checks before discussing ways to navigate (or eliminate) the potential dangers of member checking. The intent of this chapter is not to provide a prescriptive solution. Rather, I encourage reflexive consideration of the specific research context (e.g., topic, participants, findings, and relational dynamics) that frames how participants will experience the member checking process.

MEMBER CHECKING, VALIDITY, AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

Member checking as a qualitative tool has been widely accepted for decades. Also known as response validation or informant feedback, member checking provides research participants an opportunity to participate in data analysis and the re-creation of their lived experiences. This seemingly straightforward process involves engaging participants at some point during a study to ensure data presented are accurate (Cho & Trent, 2006; Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, near the end of a study with homeless youth in Los Angeles I asked a school district representative and staff at a shelter to review initial drafts of manuscripts (e.g., Tierney, Gupton, & Hallett, 2008). They confirmed findings as well as provided additional information based upon their understandings of the processes. Before addressing critiques, I begin with a discussion of the underlying motivations that have led to considering member checking as an essential aspect of qualitative research.

Qualitative researchers concerned with validity and trustworthiness have sought methodological tools (e.g., thick description, triangulation, and member checking) capable of persuading readers of the accuracy of their findings. The justification for utilizing these strategies reflects the need to justify the value of qualitative methodologies as policymakers and administrators give greater value to experimental methods. This platform provided for quantitative methodologies has encouraged some qualitative researchers to create and routinely employ validation tools. Most discussions of member checking involve improving rigor and accuracy through establishing trustworthiness or validity. Conducting member checks has been heralded as a critical aspect of establishing trustworthiness and meeting the criteria of validity, credibility, and believability that are assessed by the academy, study participants, and readers (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking is frequently used in tandem with several other strategies, including prolonged engagement, thick description, extended time in the field, and triangulation (Guba, 1981; Lietz et al., 2006; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Clear divisions exist between scholars attempting to establish trustworthiness versus validity. The purpose of this chapter is not to choose sides in the debate about validity or trustworthiness. Rather, I work from the assumption that researchers drawing from both perspectives employ
member checking as one tool in the process of increasing the strength and utility of their findings.

Member checking frequently involves a continuous process of testing findings with participants (Cho & Trent, 2006; Guba, 1981). Member checks can be completed in a number of ways, including informal interviews, journal entries, and focus groups during or near the end of data collection (e.g., Creswell & Miller, 2000; Guba, 1981; Lietz et al., 2006). Member checking has been heralded as “the single most important action” (Guba, 1981, p. 85) to establish credibility. Creswell and Miller (2000) argue that member checking is always needed to document the rigor of qualitative research. Allowing participants the ability to review findings limits the threat of researcher bias through collaborative interaction with the participants (Cho & Trent, 2006; Lietz et al., 2006; Padgett, 1998). Disagreements or additional information gathered should be incorporated into the data analysis process (Decrop, 1999).

Even for those who do not agree with notions of validity and trustworthiness, member checking has been used to address issues of power (Doyle, 2007). The process of eliciting feedback has the potential to dismantle the power imbalance that exists between the researcher and participant. Many researchers who argue that “truth seeking” validity attempts are flawed may still employ member checks as a method of giving participants a voice in the research process (Cho & Trent, 2006). Some researchers have gone so far as to give participants the final say in how data are used in the manuscript (Moss, 2004).

Locke and Velamuri (2009) outline three main critiques of member checking: (1) little guidance exists concerning how to conduct member checks; (2) lack of awareness about the implications of study design choices or how to deal with participant feedback; and (3) limited understanding of the relational complexities and epistemological ambiguities. As aforementioned, few explicit discussions of how to engage participants in the member checking process exist. Frequently authors provide little more than a mention that member checking was conducted with few details of how the process unfolded. As a result, future researchers have little guidance concerning how to conduct the process or how to evaluate the positive (or negative) impact that member checking has on establishing either validity or trustworthiness. Simply asking participants to provide feedback does not automatically equate credibility (Cho & Trent, 2006). Sandelowski (1993) challenges the notions of member checking leading to rigor and validity. She argues that qualitative research cannot be easily confined to a list of tools and procedures that assess value; rather it reflects the complex social processes being studied. A few scholars have begun to address this concern by openly discussing the member checking process (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Foster, 2004; Moss, 2004; Shehadeh & Burns, 2010).

The second critique builds upon the first. Locke and Velamuri (2009) argue that researchers understand the perceived importance of including
member checks, but few guidelines exist to guide researchers through the process of integrating the feedback into research findings. Some researchers may feel compelled to let the participants have the “final say” on what gets included in the manuscript. Others argue that member checking provides another form of data, but the participants’ perspective should not be valued above the researcher’s analysis. Even though there has been plenty of theorizing about member checking as a validity tool, there is little guidance on the actual process (Doyle, 2007). Cursory comments, at best, are included in methodology sections of most manuscripts with few details about how the researcher actually engaged in the process or how member checking framed the findings (Fjellman-Wiklund, Sundelin, & Brulin, 2002; Locke & Velamuri, 2009). Researchers have also begun to recognize the importance of considering the specific context when conducting member checks. In a study of elderly care, Doyle (2007) collaborated with a participant in the pilot study to develop a process of conducting member checks that avoided further disempowering this marginalized community. Given the physical restraints of some participants, Doyle included audiotapes and interviews as an alternative to reading for those who had visual impairments.

The final critique concerns the complexity of navigating the relational aspects of eliciting member feedback. Burawoy and colleagues (1991) argue that allowing participants to challenge findings is good in principle, but has the potential to create conflict with the researcher if participants disagree. When disagreement occurs, a decision needs to be made concerning whose perspective and analysis will be given priority. Disregarding the participant’s view may lead to further marginalization. Giving too much weight to the participant could silence the research process (Bradshaw, 2001). Turner and Coen (2008) challenge the notion that participants should have the final say in how findings are presented. In their study of law student socialization, they found that individuals in the process of being socialized had a difficult time seeing the impact on their worldview. Instead of allowing the participants to overrule their analysis, Turner and Coen incorporated the “data” collected during member checking into their findings. The assumption is that member checking is at worst a neutral process and at best empowering. For example, Stake (1995) argues that member checking rarely yields much usable feedback. He suggests that the process is “not very satisfying, but entirely necessary” (p. 116).

A few researchers have begun to question the benign nature of asking participants to review data or summaries. Moss (2004) conducted a study of teachers from Spain who taught in Texas as part of an exchange program. Her initial group of participants was embarrassed by their verbatim transcripts and feared their non-native grammatical structures might be perceived as ignorance. She chose to discontinue having participants review transcripts and waited to present condensed summaries to limit potential embarrassment. Moss argues that part of establishing trustworthiness involves “protecting the participant well-being while putting their voices in the forefront”
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(p. 371). Similarly, Carlson (2010) felt that strictly conforming to member checking expectations placed credibility procedures before the participants’ dignity. She argues that the “traps” of member checking could have been avoided had she prioritized the researcher–participant relationship above methodological concerns. In what follows, I continue to raise questions in regards to how marginalized individuals may experience this process.

IDENTIFYING AND CONFRONTING THE DANGERS

I began my work as a qualitative researcher with the assumption that I would never write anything about anyone that he or she would not have the opportunity to approve, or at least review. I aligned myself with theorists who designed studies intended to empower participants and sought to elevate their voice. I did not want to further mute marginalized groups by “taking” their stories and using them purely for personal gain. As Carlson (2010) found, I held rigidly to “rules” as a novice researcher without fully understanding the challenges or potential impacts of the different methodological tools. I also planned to abide by the “do no harm” mandate. Little did I know the expectations of trustworthiness and avoiding harm may conflict. In addition, I did not consider how different methodological tools may complicate the process of conducting member checks.

My research career began as a graduate student working on a qualitative study of homeless students in Los Angeles (Tierney & Hallett, 2010). I was charged with locating and interviewing 60 homeless youth as well as developing extended life histories with 6 of them. At the conclusion of that study, I decided to conduct ethnographic case studies of a specific subgroup of homeless youth—those living doubled-up (Hallett, 2012a; 2012b). I spent nearly three years in the community developing relationships with the youth and their families. As I had been trained, I included member checking in the study designs and during the informed consent process I explained that they would have an opportunity to review the findings. Whereas most students did not really care to review my findings, those who participated in life histories or case studies were particularly interested in my study. They were fascinated by the prospect of their lives being turned into a book. My experiences in the field began to challenge my initial presumptions of the absolute value of member checking.

HEARING NEGATIVE PREDUCTIONS
(RELATIONAL DYNAMICS AND TIME IN FIELD)

As I began working with the data and writing, I wondered how the participants might receive what I had to say about them. I worried they would reject how I portrayed them or the overall findings. More disconcerting,
they might accept and internalize my findings without question. I began to weigh the consequences of asking marginalized students to read my findings. Adolescence is a fragile time when individuals are still in the process of forming identity. The ethnographic case study of the homeless students living doubled-up focused on four youths. Based upon my analysis, I predicted two students would graduate from high school and transition to college. One of the students, Kylee, faced numerous challenges that appeared to diminish the likelihood she would achieve her goals—attending college, becoming a social worker, and purchasing her own home. She lacked knowledge of the educational process and her high rate of residential mobility had disrupted her educational participation.

Checking “facts” with Kylee was not a problem. We had developed a friendship. I attended birthday parties and holiday celebrations. And we had numerous discussions about life while “kicking it” on the sidewalk near where she lived. She eagerly read vignettes I intended to use as the base of my book. She laughed while reading my portrayal of her afternoon adventure with two of her girlfriends watching the boy she had a crush on play soccer: “It is really good.” She pointed out a few errors (e.g., her sister’s age), but agreed the vignette accurately portrayed her experiences. As I finished the first draft of the findings section I began to rethink the appropriateness of having her read my final manuscript. I had planned to allow the students to review the findings to provide feedback about how I made sense out of their lives and empower their voices. My analysis included grim prospects for Kylee. I had to consider the potential psychological and educational harms that may result from telling a 17-year-old who trusted me that I expected her failure. (Conversely, researchers may also need to consider the potential implications of predicting success and whether that may set unrealistic expectations or leave the participant feeling he or she let the researcher or self down if those predictions are not realized.)

Regardless of the “truthfulness” or “validity” of my analysis, what were the potential impacts of telling Kylee that I expected her failure? I was not as much concerned that she would challenge my findings as much as I was concerned that she would not. Rather than objecting, she might internalize my (potentially incorrect) interpretations of her life and future. My “educated guess” about negative outcomes could shape current and future aspirations as well as views of self. How would my analysis inform or constrain her identity development?

RE-LIVING DATA COLLECTED (THICK DESCRIPTION)

The adolescents who participated in my research had frequently endured significant trauma. The interview process became a safe space to give voice to their experiences with the understanding that I would draw from their lives to inform educational policy and practice. Many of the individuals
shared deeply personal and at times painful stories that painted a picture of intense abuse and neglect. During one interview at a homeless shelter, Jennifer shared her experiences as a teenager living on the street. Her lack of residential stability began when she fled an abusive family at 13 years old and moved in with a much older boyfriend who introduced her to drugs. That relationship also failed. She found herself living in abandoned buildings and engaging in prostitution to fuel her drug habit. At the end of the interview tears welled up in her eyes as she confided that she might be pregnant and had to move out of the youth shelter in two weeks when she turned 18. “I don’t know what I am gonna do, you know.” She took a deep breath. “I guess I will figure something out.”

The emotional interview weighed heavily on me. The next day I began constructing her story and incorporating her “data” into my manuscript. I had offered to return to the homeless shelter to share my initial findings with the staff and intended to allow the participants to review my data and manuscript. However, I became concerned about the impact of asking Jennifer to review her data. The interview may (or may not) have been a therapeutic process and she may have believed her story could be useful in helping other students. The resources I provided may (or may not) have helped her find a residential support in a shelter for homeless mothers, and educational resources could have been useful in helping her return to school. However, what value would she gain from reviewing an emotionally charged interview? I worried about the potential impact of re-living her traumatic experiences. The manuscript may be experienced differently than simply talking. The first telling had been difficult. I could not bring myself to force her to re-live the interview. I had to consider the emotional toll of seeing her life in print.

Further complicating the process was the need to use “thick description” as a measure of trustworthiness. In order to capture the experiences of homeless youth I relied on creating a clear portrait of their lives and drawing extensively from interviews to allow their voices to be heard. Ruth attended a large public high school in Los Angeles. She took great pride in her appearance. Most of her friends and teachers did not realize that she lived in a storage room behind a church that did not have a sink or bathroom. Her family filled two buckets of water each night—one for drinking and bathing; the other a toilet. Creating a clear portrait involved a detailed description of her living environment to help readers understand how her residential context framed how she attended school. Initial findings from the study highlighted how homeless youth endure social and personal shame as a result of their living environments. I became concerned that reading about her living environment and seeing the portrait I created might magnify her shame. I did not know how she would receive descriptions of her living environment reflected back through my own lens and cultural script. The process might improve my understanding, but humiliate Ruth. I decided to sacrifice any efforts to increase validity or trustworthiness in order to protect her psychological health.
LOSING PRIVACY (TRIANGULATION)

I interviewed and observed peers, family members, and adults who influenced the participants’ choices in order to complete the case studies. These individuals generally supported (or at least wanted to support) the participants’ educational aspirations. However, one family in particular was so plagued by instability and conflict that the mother had little time to think about her children’s schooling. Isaac’s stepmother, Faith, struggled to meet the family’s basic needs and turned to alcohol to numb the stress of her living situation. “Isaac is just a problem.” She shook her head. “He ain’t going to be nothing. He just a bad kid and be causing me problems.” Several times over the course of the year I observed Isaac ask Faith to take him to register for school. Her response was either “I don’t have time today” or “you always be wanting something.” I drove her to the school on one occasion to help Isaac register for an independent study program. However, Faith refused to attend the mandatory quarterly parent conferences. “I don’t know why I need to be doing this.” She shrugged. “He ain’t going to finish anyways.” He eventually was dropped from the program and never returned to school.

Faith’s disengagement and negative comments about Isaac were fundamental to his experience living in a doubled-up residence. Triangulating the data involved presenting his frustration about Faith as well as her commentary about him and my own observations. My goal was not to blame her for his lack of engagement, but to illustrate how the living arrangement and complex social structures framed the worldviews of everyone in the residence. That being said, I began to feel uncomfortable about sharing Faith’s comments with Isaac. Granted, he may have heard her make similar statements, but I did not want to reinforce his sense of isolation. He had been abandoned by his father and his mother had been sent to prison when he was in middle school. Faith was the only parental figure in his life. In addition, the residence was plagued by conflict and occasional violence. Isaac’s place in the home was in jeopardy—he was nearing his 18th birthday, when Faith would no longer receive assistance from social services, and he had been unable to find employment. I did not want to increase the level of conflict by sharing data that might fuel arguments.

RE-ENVISIONING MEMBER CHECKING
AS PARTICIPANT-ORIENTED

Member checking seems self-explanatory. Researchers check with members. The assumed obvious nature and simplicity may be why researchers tend to provide no more than a sentence or two as a nod toward trustworthiness. Even qualitative methods journals and books tend to understate the complexity of this process. The motivations and critiques typically revolve
around how member checking influences credibility, but do not really take into account the potential harms. Much of the theorizing has hyper-focused on the benefits/challenges for the researcher and how the academy will receive the final product; however, less has been discussed about how the participant experiences the process and the potential dangers. The concerns tend to focus on the research, not those researched.

I continue to believe that member checking can be a useful tool. However, I recommend critical reflection before and during the study to avoid unintentionally harming participants. I offer the following suggestions to help navigate the potential dangers. First, the researcher should not suggest that member checking will happen until he or she gets to know the participant and has a sense of what the findings and data will look like. The participant may naturally want to read about his or her life, but that does not mean that he or she fully understands the potential consequences. The researcher should critically reflect on what the process may look like for each participant before putting him or her in a situation that could result in harm. Many studies involve relational dynamics that evolve as the researcher spends time with the participant. The relational closeness magnifies potential harms as the participant may feel betrayed or judged by someone who has been viewed as a “friend” or “mentor.” Critical reflection is necessary to gain a sense of how these relational dynamics coupled with the findings may frame the participant’s future choices or self-esteem. I did not want to create a research-generated, self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. Although considering the “validity” or “trustworthiness” of the manuscript is important, the potential psychological consequences need at least equal consideration.

Second, the specific participants, context, and data should be taken into account before embarking on a member check. Each participant will have a different story, personality, and relationship with the researcher. These dynamics need reflexive consideration before presenting data and findings to participants. As much as possible, the researcher should carefully read the materials through the lens of each participant before asking him or her to engage in this potentially harmful process. The researcher should also consider how the other methodological tools may interact with the data given by the participant (e.g., thick description of observations or triangulation with data collected from other sources). The altered data and findings may be difficult for the participant. Researchers should wait until data have been collected to engage in a conversation with the participant about potentially conducting a member check. Initial conversations with my participants included member checking, but I am not sure that was appropriate. I began my study more worried about validity than the participant. Validity measures should never outweigh the need to avoid harm.

Finally, the vague guidance provided in methodological textbooks and many research articles need not be rigidly adhered to in order to establish credibility. The notion that all data and manuscripts must be approved by
the participants is absurd and potentially harmful. Member checking is not a “one size fits all” process. In some situations it may be appropriate to provide all data and drafts of manuscripts to a participant; at other times an alternative strategy or avoiding member checking altogether may be most appropriate. The researcher may also find that alternative strategies may be more appropriate (e.g., Doyle, 2007; Duneier, 1999).

My intent is not to identify all possible harms. The dangers will vary depending upon the study design, topic, researchers, participants, and context. As such, the researcher needs to reflexively and critically consider the potential impacts of member checking before engaging in a process that may have long-term, unintended consequences. Although credibility measures warrant consideration in qualitative research, limiting potential harm to participants takes priority. In particular, marginalized individuals and groups should be protected from further marginalization as a result of participating in the research process. Discussions of member checking that position participants as subjects of research create the potential for undermining their humanity. The process of selecting trustworthiness measures should take into account the impact on the participant, not just the findings. If protecting validity outweighs protecting the participant, then trustworthiness cannot be achieved.

REFERENCES

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