Feedback from research participants:

Are member checks useful in qualitative research?

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Abstract

It is often assumed that use of member checks improves the credibility of qualitative research. Published literature mentioning 'member checks' was reviewed to identify the purposes and procedures for seeking feedback from research participants, and outcomes reported from the use of member checks. Four themes reflecting underlying assumptions about the purposes of research that have implications for member checks were identified; theory generalisation, representation, participation and change. Member checks are unlikely to be relevant to research focussed on theory development and generalisation. For other types of research, member checks might be justifiable but there was little evidence that member checks improved research findings. Member checks can be useful in specific circumstances such as obtaining participant approval for use of extended quotations or case studies and where anonymity cannot be guaranteed. In evaluation, stakeholder reviews of draft reports can be seen as good research practice. In participatory or collaborative research, ongoing contact might be expected to include member checks.

Key words

Member checks, validation interviews, qualitative interviews, evaluation, credibility, validity

Short title: A*re member checks useful?*

Feedback from research participants:

Are member checks useful in qualitative research?

The literature on member checks has diverse and conflicting views about the importance of feedback from research participants in qualitative research. The most common meanings for member checks refer to interview respondents being sent for review, comment and/or correction; (a) a transcript of their own interview, (b) a copy of emerging findings and (c) a draft copy of a research report. It can also refer to participants being sent their own case summaries to review.

Proponents of member checks maintain that such checks enhance the credibility or validity of the research findings. Lincoln and Guba's book 'Naturalistic Inquiry' has frequently been cited as a guide for establishing credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research. In their view 'the member check.... is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility' (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 314). They also stated that;

> The investigator who has received the agreement of the respondent groups on the credibility of his or her work has established a strong beachhead toward convincing readers and critics of the authenticity of the work. (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 315)

Lincoln and Guba do not describe how member checks might take place, nor do they elaborate the rationale for describing member checks as crucial for establishing credibility or authenticity. Their text did not discuss why or how routine member checks might be considered either essential or useful for enhancing 'credibility.'

In qualitative research in psychology there are diverse patterns regarding use of member checks. Such checks have been described as an important part of the validation process in ethnographic research on the experiences of parents of children deemed at risk for developmental delays or disabilities (Pighini et al. 2014). In contrast, member checks were not mentioned in a discursive psychology analysis of antidepressant use and the diagnosis of depression (Sigurdson & McMullen 2013).

Research guides and texts discussing quality, validity and credibility in qualitative research often recommend member checks, such as sending respondents their transcript for review, as one of the recommended procedures to confirm or enhance credibility in qualitative research

(e.g., Lo 2014, Kornbluh 2015). A comprehensive review of checklists for assessing the quality of qualitative research reported that 13 of the 22 checklists included in the review considered 'respondent validation' to be an indicator of the quality of the analysis. (Tong, Sainsbury & Craig 2007). The 32-item checklist constructed by the review authors included the following item;

> 'Were transcripts returned to participants for comment and/or correction?' (Tong et al. 2007, Table 1).

No specific justification was given as to why or how member checks enhance the quality of qualitative research. In much of the literature mentioning member checks, the view that member checks enhance quality seems to be a taken-for-granted assumption that does not require justification.

In contrast to views supporting member checks, many qualitative research papers do not report using member checks and some sources caution against uncritical use of member checks (e.g., Barbour 2001). A review of three online validity appraisal instruments for qualitative research did not mention any items relating to the use of member checks (Hannes, Lockwood & Pearson 2010).

Given these contrasting views, a detailed review of the literature on member checks seemed warranted. The general aim of the review was to address the question: Under what circumstances might member checks be justified and for what specific types of qualitative research? The specific areas of focus of the review were: (1) to describe the labels and procedures commonly used for seeking respondent feedback, (2) to identify the reasons and related underlying assumptions regarding how member checks improve research quality, (3) to examine evidence regarding whether member checks improved or enhanced research quality.

Methods

A narrative review was conducted on published papers which reported, discussed or recommended seeking feedback from research participants who had been interviewed or participated in focus groups. Although other forms of qualitative data collection might be used (e.g., diaries, self-completion questionnaires), all of the literature located on member checks focussed on either individual or group interviews such as focus groups. The literature

search was designed to locate diverse published sources that could be used to map the parameters of interest. These included; reasons for using member checks, the procedures used and whether member checks had improved research outcomes.

An initial literature search located relevant papers to identify key terms related to feedback from interviewees in qualitative research. Subsequently a database search was conducted using the Medline, CINQUAL and PsychInfo databases and Google Scholar. The key terms used in the literature search were:

> qualitative AND interviews AND ('feedback' or 'member check' or 'respondent validation')

The items found were filtered to include only journal articles published from January 2000 to the time of the search (December 2015) and for which a full text version of the article was available in English. This search strategy with the filters used provided a reasonable number of published sources that could be analysed with the resources available. While not an exhaustive review, the search strategy located a sufficiently diverse set of sources to document the range of practices and views regarding member checks.

The articles identified from the database searches were screened for relevance and 31 articles were included in the review. Many papers that simply reported the use of member checks, without describing how or why they were used or their effect, were not included in the review. All of the papers reviewed from the initial literature search described above were screened to identify any key citations published before 2000. From this screening a small number of pre-2000 publications were added. Other published sources which were known to the author were also included. These included books, book chapters and journal articles on qualitative research that had described specific procedures, reasons and outcomes related to member checks. Some of these were published before 2000. A total of 44 literature sources were analysed. These sources were of three general types; qualitative research reports, journal reviews and commentaries addressing member checks, and sections in books on qualitative research which described or recommended member checks.

The full text articles and relevant text from books were analysed using the qualitative analysis software NVivo (v10). A general inductive approach was used for the analysis (Thomas 2006). Each of the literature sources was read in detail to identify the reasons for using member checks. Guiding frames included; the reasons for conducting member checks,

underlying assumptions regarding member checks, the types of qualitative research for which member checks were used or recommended, specific procedures used or recommended for carrying out member checks including the types of responses requested from research participants, and any evidence relating to improved research outcomes resulting from member checks.

Results

The findings are presented in four sections. The first section describes the labels and specific procedures recommended or used for member checks. The second section outlines four themes that reflect assumptions underlying qualitative research. The implications of each theme for member checks are considered. The third section describes other reasons for using member checks not already covered in the underlying assumptions. The last section describes outcomes from studies that examined how member checks affected qualitative findings.

Labels and procedures

Multiple terms or descriptors were used to refer to the process of member checking in the sources analysed. While the most commonly used term was 'member checks,' several other terms were also used. These are shown below.

- Member checks, member checking (Cho & Trent 2006; Creswell 2000; Guba & Lincoln 1989; Koelsch 2013; Lincoln & Guba 1985; Tracy 2010)

- Member validation (Bloor 1997; Koelsch, 2013)

- Respondent validation (Barbour 2001; Mays & Pope 2000; Tong et al., 2007)

- Member reflections (Tracy 2010)

- Interviewee transcript review (Hagens, Dobrow & Chafe 2009)

- Participant feedback (Curry, Nembhard & Bradley 2009)

- Participant review (Patton 2002)

- Participant validation strategies (Curry et al. 2009)

- Validation interview (Buchbinder 2011)

- Stakeholder involvement (Brandon & Fukunaga 2014)

Authors using labels which include 'validation' are likely to assume there is a 'correct' version of the interview or other data source. Other terms are more neutral in relation to underlying assumptions, such as 'participant feedback' and 'member reflections.' For example, Tracy described why she avoided the term 'member checks.'

> ... because the labels of member checks, validation, and verification suggest a single true reality, I instead offer the umbrella term member reflections—which may be applicable to a wider range of paradigmatic approaches (Tracy 2010, p. 844).

Checking the 'accuracy' of a respondent's account after it has been recorded by the researcher, does not necessarily assume a positivist perspective. It may be seen as simply checking whether that account corresponds with what the participant recollected that they said during the interview.

Several techniques have been reported for member checks. The most common procedure is sending interview transcripts or case summaries to respondents for review (e.g., Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller & Neumann 2011; Pazokian, Zagheri Tafreshi & Rassouli 2014).

> The researcher presents to all or some of the research participants their interview transcript, and/or the researcher's interpretation and all or part of the data report, to allow them to comment on the findings and the researcher's interpretations of their own and others' quotes. Study participants either confirm or deny that the summaries reflect their views, feelings and experiences, thus supporting or challenging the researcher's understandings. (Goldblatt et al. 2011, pp. 389-390, citations omitted)

Another procedure is to send participants their own case summaries, compiled by the researcher, to review (Wainwright et al. 2010) or to discuss with the researcher during a follow-up interview (Buchbinder 2011, Koelsch 2013).

A third option is to send participants a written summary of emerging themes, or a copy of the draft report to review (Creswell 2000). Emerging themes are seen as suitable where the data were obtained from focus group interviews (Herrman, Rogers & Ehrenthal 2012) as this can avoid including detailed personal information. The review can be completed either by the participant sending written feedback or participating in a focus group convened specifically to review the study findings (Bloor 1997).

Studies reporting use of member checks often provide little or no information about the procedures used, the responses from respondents or changes resulting from member checks (e.g., Herrman et al. 2012; Huang et al. 2008; Joseph 2015; Pighini et al. 2014).

Themes related to member checks

Four themes were constructed from analysis of the literature sources. These were; theory generalisation, representation, participation, and change. Each of these themes (summarised in Table 1) reflects underlying assumptions relating to the purposes and appropriate strategies for conducting qualitative research. These themes provide a framework for understanding some of the multiple perspectives evident in qualitative research and a context for determining when member checks might be seen as appropriate or unnecessary.

Table 1 Underlying assumptions in qualitative research

Assumption	Description	Implications for member checks
Theory generalisation	A theory will be developed from accounts provided by multiple participants that can potentially be generalised to other settings. The research team is responsible for developing theory	Inaccuracies in interviews or revisions by individual respondents are unlikely to influence theory development. Feedback from respondents is unnecessary and may be an unwanted intrusion
Representation	Representing the experiences of participants in ways they can recognise and that reflect their realities	Member checks may be useful if accurate recording of participant experiences and perspectives is required
Participation	Ongoing participation of respondents through multiple contacts with researchers is expected	Collaboration is planned between the researchers and respondents during data collection and analysis. Opportunities are provided for respondents to revise their accounts or comment on findings
Change	The purpose of qualitative research is to facilitate personal and social change	Member checks are part of the change process through reducing inequality between the researcher and participants and empowering participants

Theory generalisation. A common purpose for qualitative research is that a generalisable theory will be developed from interview data with multiple participants. The theory is

expected to portray the psychological and social processes that are common to multiple participants, but does not necessarily represent the experiences of specific individuals in the sample. Grounded theory strategies typically have the purpose of theory development (Strauss & Corbin 1998), as do thematic and inductive analyses. The validity or trustworthiness of the theory constructed by the research team is determined by the extent to which the theory is generalisable to other groups and settings. This point was evident in the multiple sources. For example,

> '.... validity is connected to analytic generalization, that is, the extent to which the results and conclusions of a study can orient other occurrences and situations.' (Sousa 2014, p. 217)

A commentary from a phenomenological perspective (Josselson 2004) referred to the process of theory development as the 'hermeneutics of demystification' which was contrasted with the 'hermeneutics of restoration' that focuses on representation of participants' experiences.

> From the stance of a hermeneutics of demystification, narrative research reports are not co-constructions of meaning between participant and researcher, but points in a conversation between the researcher and a group of colleagues who share interest in a particular conceptual or theoretical frame. (Josselson 2004, p. 19)

In a discursive psychology study of people taking antidepressants, the underlying assumptions stated regarding the analysis were consistent with a theory generalisation perspective.

> Our assumption is that human beings are situated in a discursive world and attitudes do not exist within the individual. While our analysis focuses on particular statements from our participants, we assume that the participants' advocacy for a particular stance derives from orientation to resources beyond the individual. (Sigurdson & McMullen 2013, p. 431)

If theory development and generalisation are the primary purpose of qualitative analysis, and the validity of the theory developed does not depend on the 'accuracy' of the portrayal of individual participants perspectives, then member checks are not relevant to establishing the validity of theories. Several authors have cautioned against using member checks to assess

the validity of theory generalisation (Barbour 2001; McConnell-Henry, Chapman & Francis 2011; Morse et al. 2002; Sousa 2014).

> The problem of member checks is that, with the exception of case study research and some narrative inquiry, study results have been synthesized, decontextualized, and abstracted from (and across) individual participants, so there is no reason for individuals to be able to recognize themselves or their particular experiences. (Morse et al. 2002, p. 16)

For the development of theory, responsibility for construction of meanings relies on the competencies and experiences of the research team. There is usually no reason to expect that individual participants would have specific expertise in critiquing a theory or framework.

> The participants themselves have no privileged claim to knowing whether our analysis is right or wrong –much as the author of a text, in a framework of deconstructionism, has no privileged knowledge of the meaning of a text. (Josselson 2004, p. 17)

While grounded theory strategies exemplify a focus on theory development, this purpose seems to occur in many qualitative research strategies, such as thematic analysis, phenomenology, discourse analysis and narrative approaches. There appears to be no particular alignment between specific research strategies and a focus on theory development.

Representation. For some researchers a primary purpose of interview-based research is representing participants' experiences and perspectives in ways they can recognise and understand. Often this purpose is not explicitly stated, but it can usually be discerned from terms used in the methodology and findings. In a 'representation' analytic strategy, findings based on interviews would be expected to convey key features of participants' realities. In this case, member checks are often be seen as a useful 'validation' technique to ensure that participants agree that findings constructed by the researchers adequately represent the realities that participants have reported. Some authors use the term 'transactional validity' to describe the process of enhancing 'representational' aspects of research validity.

> We define transactional validity in qualitative research as an interactive process between the researcher, the researched, and the collected data that is aimed at achieving a relatively higher level of accuracy and consensus by means of revisiting facts, feelings, experiences, and values or beliefs collected and interpreted. (Cho & Trent 2006, p. 321)

For transactional validity, member checking becomes part of the data collection process.

> Member checking occurs throughout the inquiry, and is a process in which collected data is 'played back' to the informant to check for perceived accuracy and reactions. (Cho & Trent 2006, p. 322)

The underlying purpose of representation is conveyed through the use of terms such as 'accuracy,' 'consensus' and 'truth.' A paper reviewing member checks described some epistemological assumptions underlying 'transactional validity' as a form of representation.

> Transactional validity serves as an umbrella term for criteria that do not abandon truth collection as a worthy goal of research. This is not, however, a naïve realist position—truth is not seen as an objective account of social reality, but rather as a coherent understanding of a participant's perception of reality.(Koelsch 2013, p. 169)

An often stated purpose for using member checks is the correction of bias or misinterpretations made by researchers and ensure accuracy and authenticity in representing participants' experiences (Fossey et al. 2002; Kornbluh 2015). In such instances, member checking is assumed to enhance reflexivity, by making researchers' aware of how their own preconceptions or biases may have influenced their writing of an account.

> Participants can be seen as functioning as the researcher's conscience to assist with researcher reflexivity. By being told that they have told the story incorrectly, researchers are given the opportunity to reflect on their own biases and other sources of misinterpretation (Koelsch 2013, p. 171).

There are multiple types of qualitative research where 'accurate' representation of participants' experiences and views might be considered important. These include case

studies or narratives focussed on specific individuals or organisations and consumers or clients receiving services (Doyle 2007). Representation can also be important in evaluation research (Patton 2002) and in community-based research where all participants come from a single community and where the research seeks to document common experiences in that community (MacKenzie, Christensen & Turner 2015).

Representation in evaluation research. A specific type of representation occurs in programme evaluation where qualitative information is obtained from stakeholders; those involved in or having an interest in how well a programme is operating. Stakeholders might include; clients, frontline staff, service managers, funding agencies and other agencies referring clients to a service. From stakeholder interviews and other information, evaluation teams will often construct a model or framework that describes how the programme works. In such instances stakeholders might be expected to have views about how well the model represents their specific experiences with the programme. (Brandon & Fukunaga 2014) Sending draft copies of evaluation reports to stakeholders to comment on provisional findings is recommended as good research practice (Stufflebeam 1999). It allows stakeholders to correct details, elaborate reasons or emphasise particular perspectives. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2013)

Stakeholder reviews or member checks can increase acceptance of the final report, and the extent to which any recommendations are implemented. Such checks are especially important in process or monitoring evaluations and where there are diverse or conflicting views about a programme among different stakeholders. It is also be useful to ensure consent to use specific information which may identify respondents.

> .... respondents may (1) verify that you have reflected their perspectives; (2) inform you of sections that, if published, could be problematic for either personal or political reasons; and (3) help you to develop new ideas and interpretations. (Patton 2002, p.560)

In some circumstances it may be risky for an evaluation team not to seek feedback from stakeholders on a draft version of the evaluation report. The following example, taken from the author's experience, illustrates some key issues in evaluation reports.

A graduate student accepted an invitation to carry out an evaluation of services provided by short-stay residential facility for children with health problems. The evaluation was commissioned by the facility manager. During the data-gathering, frontline service staff were critical of the manager's lack of cultural competence when organising events at which the families of children attended (most of the families were from a non-dominant ethnic group). Potentially the frontline staff could lose their jobs if the information they provided was included in the evaluation report to be sent to the manager. After discussions with university supervisors, the graduate student took the section of text covering staff criticisms back to the relevant staff. She asked them which comments they wished to have included (with an option being to include no comments at all) and if the comments were included, how they would like to those comments expressed. In this way she handed control back to the frontline staff to make decisions about content of the evaluation report that was relevant to their work. After time to think about the content of the draft report, the staff decided their critical comments about the manager should be left in the final version of the report.

Participation. Participation refers to the expectation that there should be ongoing engagement between the researcher and participants. Some writers on qualitative research strategies advocate continuing participation with participants as a preferred strategy. Often such participation is assumed to facilitate reciprocity and equalisation of power relationships between researchers and participants, and facilitate empowerment of participants (Fossey et al. 2002; Goldblatt et al. 2011; Kornbluh 2015; Patton 2002; Tracy 2010). In community-based research, participation is often intended to enhance empowerment of the communities in which participants live (MacKenzie et al. 2015). In participatory research strategies member checks are usually planned as part of the overall data collection (Koelsch 2013).

Participatory or collaborative research strategies may involve extensive contact with research participants to get to know them and their lifestyles. Ongoing contact with participants can be part of 'prolonged engagement' (Cho & Trent 2006) which is seen as an important validation technique. It can become similar to ethnography where the researcher spends time in the field to get to know and understand the cultural patterns of participants and seeks involvement of 'cultural informants' in the interpretation of emerging findings.

The key aim of participation strategies such as these was to establish participants as experts in the phenomenon under investigation, namely, the older person's experience of receiving CACPs [Community Aged Care Packages]. These strategies also supported the development of a negotiated framework for interpreting meaning, a framework that is implied by the selected paradigm of the study, philosophical hermeneutics. (Doyle 2007, p. 890)

Participatory approaches usually involve representation, where participants' perspectives emerge from the joint construction of finding with the researcher or research team.

.... the "truth" regarding a phenomenon becomes a shared interpretation or construction of meaning surrounding a phenomenon, developed by both the researcher and the participants, with the participant maintaining an active role in the interpretive process. This convergence of perspectives is believed to involve far more rich insights into human experiences, through the process of interpretation, and leads to meaning being negotiated, rather than constructed, by the researcher. (Doyle 2007, p. 892)

In participatory research strategies, member checks become part of the ongoing interaction between researchers and participants

Member checks are also suitable for researchers who view the research process as participatory, consisting of building participant capacity, collaboration, and mutual learning, or for action research in which the aim of the research is to utilize findings to inform social action. Here the act of engaging in dialogue and providing feedback regarding the researchers' initial qualitative findings increases participant ownership over the data to utilize for social change (Kornbluh 2015, p. 398, citations omitted)

In participatory strategies there can be potential problems that are often not acknowledged by advocates of member checks. Contacting interviewees again and asking for feedback on a transcript or other types of feedback may be seen by interviewees as intrusive. It creates an obligation to spend additional time reviewing a transcript or draft report. Such intrusion could be seen as ethically inappropriate if interviewees have not given prior approval to be contacted again. Some participants may be willing to disclose information in a one-off

interview that they would be reluctant to share if ongoing contact with researchers is expected.

> Moreover, it may be the onetime meeting and promised anonymity that enables study participants to speak openly—just as people sometimes share their most intimate stories with a bar tender or a stranger on a train. (Goldblatt et al. 2011, p. 393)

For some participants, expecting just one encounter with an interviewer may lead to greater willingness to share their views and experiences than if several contacts or meetings with the researchers are expected.

Change. A theme evident in several texts discussing qualitative validity and member checks was a focus on personal or social change resulting from participation in the research process. The concept of 'transformational validity' emphasises social change as an intended outcome of qualitative research.

> .... we define transformational validity in qualitative research as a progressive, emancipatory process leading toward social change that is to be achieved by the research endeavor itself. Such a process in qualitative research, as a critical element in changing the existing social condition of the researched, involves a deeper, self-reflective, empathetic understanding of the researcher while working with the researched. (Cho & Trent 2006, p. 322)

To achieve transformational validity, participation of respondents and a collaborative relationship during the research process are needed. Member check procedures are a part of this collaboration. For some researchers, multiple purposes are important. For example representation, participation and change may be used as combined strategies for a specific project (Cho & Trent 2006; Koelsch 2013). Projects are planned both to represent participant perspectives as well as assess changes among participants, some of which may result from their involvement in the research.

> .... the member check is a useful tool for both seeking accuracy and assessing change throughout the interview process. Because it can be utilized for both of these goals,

the member check interview is a powerful means with which to assess validity. (Koelsch 2013, p. 176)

Another type of change described is member checks leading to psychological benefits or 'therapeutic' outcomes for research participants. A study of the experiences of stepfathers reported this process.

> We utilized member checking at the completion of the data analysis phase in which all participants were given the results section to read and check for accuracy of the dialogues. After each participant had read their comments as well as those of other stepfathers, they recognized that the process had altered their view of the experience. For most, if not all participants, there had been a shift in how they viewed their situation; they had gained insight into their experience and reported feeling less overwhelmed after reading the accounts of the other participants. (Harper & Cole 2012, p. 513)

Empowerment or collaborative approaches in evaluation research emphasise stakeholder involvement in the evaluation research design and development of preliminary findings (Rodríguez-Campos 2012). Collaborative approaches to evaluation may use a somewhat different approach compared to member checks. A project starts with discussions with key stakeholders about how the evaluation will proceed and what methods will be used for data gathering and analysis. Participants are directly involved in developing procedures used for stakeholder feedback and so these are consistent with the expectations established for the project. One of the key outcomes expected is utilisation of the evaluation findings by stakeholders to improve the operation of programmes and services.

Other reasons for using member checks

Two other reasons for using ethical checks, not covered in the underlying assumptions section, were gathering additional information and obtaining consent to use a case study or extended quotation.

Gathering additional information from participants is sometimes stated as a reason for using member checks (Bloor 1997; Bradbury-Jones, Irvine & Sambrook 2010; Guba & Lincoln

1989; Mays & Pope, 2000). Interviewee responses made during checks of their transcripts provide additional data which can be included in findings.

> [Member reflections] .... provide opportunities for additional data and elaboration that will enhance the credibility of the emerging analysis (Tracy, 2010, p. 844).

It is not clear that use of member checks to obtain additional information is more effective than increasing the sample size if a research strategy includes reaching data saturation. If the focus of the research is on detailed case studies or documenting changes over time then obtaining additional information from participants may be warranted. However, if the purpose is theory generalisation then member checks to obtain additional information may not be an effective use of resources.

A specific purpose for member checks can be to obtain consent to use in a report quotations from an interview or a case study. Member checks may also be conducted with specific participants who may have concerns about being identified, how they are represented in a report, or have asked that some parts of the interview to be excluded (Wolgemuth et al. 2015, p. 360).

> The use of illustrative quotes and the importance of providing context information to ground one's interpretation increased the risk of breaching confidentiality. (Goldblatt et al 2011, p. 392)

Where interviews are conducted with small samples, or where respondents may know others who have been interviewed, it is possible that respondents could be identified (either by themselves or by others who know them) from quotations or case studies (Bickford & Nisker 2015; Goldblatt et al. 2011). In such cases it would be good practice to send quotes or case studies to the relevant respondents, together with the accompanying text (or a draft copy of the report), to ensure participants consent to the use of their information in the way portrayed and to cover the possibility that confidentiality may not be guaranteed if quotations in a report are seen by colleagues or other people who know the respondent. For example, if respondents express concerns about how their information will be used, they can be selectively offered member checks. In such cases they can be sent a draft copy of the report containing their information, to show how it is being used.

Outcomes from using member checks

Many published studies reported using member checks, but provided little or no information about the procedures used and about changes in findings that resulted from member checks. A small number of papers have reported these details. A review of how member checks were reported in six qualitative reports in health communication noted that

> In their methods sections, most of these articles provided insufficient details of actual changes in researchers' interpretations as a result of the member-check process. This lack of detail concerning the procedure, its application and results, and its limited use in healthcare studies in general and health communication manuscripts in particular, raises questions concerning its applicability in this field. (Goldblatt et al. 2011, p.390, citations omitted).

Lack of detail about member checks in the methods sections of reports may be partly due to journal limitations on manuscript length for published reports. However, the lack of mention of changes to findings can be seen as an indication that member checks are likely to have had little or no impact on research findings.

Response rates to member checks are commonly very low. Three papers that provided information about the proportion of respondents who replied to requests for member checks all reported low response rates. These were; 3 out of 19 respondents (Goldblatt et al. 2011) and 22 out of 51 respondents (Hagens et al. 2009) and 5 out of 16 (Mero-Jaffe 2011). Poor response rates to member check requests can be seen as reluctance to engage in additional participation.

Only three papers in the review sources specifically reported details about changes made as a result of member checks. Findings from these papers are consistent with the view member checks have little or no effect on findings (Hagens et al. 2009; Mero-Jaffe 2011; Pighini et al. 2014). In these studies, the changes respondents made to interview transcripts would not have affected findings in studies using qualitative analyses.

In one paper interview transcripts were mailed to participants with a request to 'review it and send any corrections' (Hagens at al. 2009, p. 2). The sample consisted of 51 Canadian healthcare stakeholders, (government representatives, health system leaders, clinical and epidemiological experts, and advocacy group representatives). Among the interviewees, 22

(43%) replied to the review request. Sixteen (31% of the sample) made changes to their transcripts. Most corrections were relatively minor changes to grammar. The authors concluded that while interviewee transcript review

> ... is employed by many researchers across numerous disciplines, overall our audit revealed that the advantages to its use may be relatively small, particularly in relation to the added time and effort required for interviewees and in light of other existing techniques to address transcript and data quality. (Hagens et al. 2009, p.7)

They also noted that

> ... the majority of interviewees who revised their transcripts did so in such a way that the transcript no longer reflected accurately the verbal exchange during the interview. Transcripts revised by interviewees therefore can be seen to represent a different type of data source than the transcripts not revised by other interviewees. (Hagens et al. 2009, p.4)

Several authors have commented on other potential problems with member checks. The main problems identified were; assumptions about participants' willingness to engage in member checks, withdrawal of information provided during the interview, and member checks requiring additional resources for a research project.

None of the papers reviewed reported information concerning participants' views about follow-up contact after an initial interview. It could be assumed that while some would welcome it, others might be neutral, or prefer not to have further contact. The very low response rates reported for member checks are consistent with the view that many respondents are indifferent to or resist further contact.

> The findings of this and other studies indicate that not all participants are keen to maintain an ongoing relationship with the study. Some participants are indifferent to how the researcher has captured their life story and how it appears in the written study report. Consequently, it is reasonably common for only a few to respond to the researcher's invitation to participate in member-check, or they respond positively, but in fact, avoid providing feedback. (Goldblatt et al. 2011, p.393)

Another potential problem with member checks is the censoring or withdrawal of information which reveals negative information about operation of organisations. Where interviewees

have high status, such as senior managers, they may only agree to be interviewed under certain conditions, such as where they

> .... have the right to comment on your draft and that you agree to make changes where the original form would be either inaccurate or in serious conflict with the commercial and corporate imperatives of [the company]. (Bradshaw 2001, p. 205)

Allowing member checks when a project is 'researching up,' may lead to such respondents removing information that casts them in a poor light. This may be result in censorship which protects powerful people from having the consequences of their decisions revealed (Bradshaw 2001).

Discussion

The information reviewed provided no evidence that routine member checks enhance the credibility or trustworthiness of qualitative research. Most research papers that reported use of member checks had little information about the procedures used. There was rarely any information about how such checks had influenced the development of research findings. For qualitative research having a primary focus on theory development and generalisation there seemed to be no convincing reasons for using member checks.

The development of qualitative synthesis strategies for literature reviews provides an effective methodology for assessing generalisation of theories from qualitative research (Campbell et al. 2011; Thomas & Harden 2008; Toye et al. 2014). Syntheses of multiple qualitative studies on a specific topic are more likely to lead to robust outcomes from qualitative research than member checks based on reviews by research participants.

Checklists that include member checks as an indicator of quality for qualitative research are problematic. In this review no evidence was found to support the view that member checks enhance research quality where data comprised interviews with participants. The inclusion of items such member checks in quality checklists may be one of the reasons why such checklists fail to correlate with 'expert' judgements when assessing the quality of qualitative research (Dixon-Woods et al. 2007).

In research where representation of individual, organisational or community perspectives is intended, member checks can be used to provide opportunities for comment, feedback to researchers and approval to use information that 'belongs' to a person or group. Such instances might include; case studies, participants' personal stories to be included in research reports, descriptions that apply to specific communities, and evaluation research where service provider organisations would be expected to have an interest in assessment of their services. In most of these cases the primary documents made available for participant feedback are likely to be draft research reports. It is less likely useful information would be obtained from participant review of individual interview transcripts, unless the transcripts are to form the basis for extended case studies published in reports.

For participatory and collaborative research, and where personal or social change are expected to result from the research, then member checks are likely to be incorporated into the design and conduct of the research and communication of findings. In such projects, there is likely to be ongoing involvement of research participants in data collection, analysis and drafting of research reports. In such cases individual checks of interview transcripts will often recede into the background and become part of multiple ongoing contacts between participants and members of the research team.

Several of the papers reviewed raised ethical issues regarding member checks. While some regarded member checks as an ethical necessity (Kornbluh 2015), others cautioned against the routine use of member checks without considerable thought as to why member checks were being used, what was expected from participants in terms of their involvement in research and avoiding harm to participants during member check procedures (Barbour 2001; Goldblatt et al. 2011; Hagens et al. 2009). Where member check procedures are to be used, initial information given to participants should include details about subsequent or follow-up contacts that the research team plan to make with participants. Specific consent should be obtained from participants for any follow-up contact required for member checks.

Conclusions

Member checks are often reported as a procedure that enhances the credibility and validity of qualitative research. This literature review did not find any evidence that use of member checks improves research quality where the primary purpose of the research is theory development.

Where the main purpose of research is ensuring accurate representation of participants' perspectives or experiences or in participatory or collaborative research strategies, selective use of member checks may be justified. Member checks may also be useful in research seeking additional information from participants, in stakeholder reviews in evaluation research, and where extensive quotations or case studies which could identify individuals are to be used in research reports.

Common problems with member checks include; a lack of response from most participants, creating additional intrusion for participants, little or no substantive changes in research findings, and the need for additional project resources.

Researchers planning to conduct member checks should provide include this information as part of the consent procedures for people approached to participate in research projects.

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