

ENGAGING INNOVATIVE KNOWLEDGE THROUGH APPLIED  
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# Member Checking in Qualitative Research



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# The Professional Relationship between the Clinical Mentor and the Nursing Academic

*What is the essence and experience of the professional relationship between the clinical mentor and the academic, and what impact does it have on clinical nursing education?*

- Explore and understand what the relationship comprises.
- Explore and understand the purpose of the relationship.
- Understand the meaning of the relationship.
- Explore and identify which factors facilitate and/or inhibit the relationship.
- Understand the impact of the relationship on the clinical mentor and academic.
- Explore and understand the impact that the relationship can have on clinical nursing education.

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# Methodology

- Hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy.
- Purposeful sampling with maximum variation will be used to allow a population with a wide variety which will in turn add to the richness of the data collected (Higginbottom, 2004).
- Population is CMs (n=8) employed with the University of Malta (UOM) and MCAST and nursing academics delivering undergraduate nursing education from the mentioned institutions (UOM n=5; MCAST n=4).
- Participants must have a minimum of twelve months experience of working with the said institutions which ensures that they have an experience of the relationship over a sustained period.

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# Data Collection

- The experience of the participants will be explored over 2 phases, the first phase will be focus-groups and the second phase will be semi-structured interviews.
- Whilst semi-structured interviews compliment the methodology of this present study, relying solely on this data collection method may prevent participants from divulging their 'lived experiences'. The reasons behind this is may be the socio-cultural issues, the fact that the mentoring system in Malta is remunerated, and due to my position as a nursing academic.
- Complimenting these two data collection methods together will serve as a triangulation method which deepens the understanding of the phenomenon (Guion, Diehl, McDonald, 2011) which further provides validity and confirmability.

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# Data Analysis

- 'Modified Phenomenological Hermeneutical Method of Data Analysis for Multiple Contexts' (Morgan, 2021)
- Permits transparency of movement from individual subjective realities to combined analysis of multiple realities in different contexts whilst providing a clear audit trail which supports the understanding of hermeneutic phenomenology through interpretation and personal or theoretical sensitising to highlight important themes.

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# Credibility

- Within qualitative research, the researcher is often both the data collector and data analyst, giving potential for researcher bias (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Mason, 2002).
- Credibility helps researchers establish that findings are believable while also maintaining the holistic complexity of the phenomena (Guba 1981).
- The iterative process of reflection, interpretation, and synthesis used in qualitative analysis means the second and third order constructs of meaning which develop can increasingly distance the results from the original interview data (Grbich, 2006).
- If studies are undertaken to understand experiences and behaviours and to potentially change practice, then participants should still be able to see their experiences within the final results.

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# Reducing bias

- The purpose of member checking (MC) is to explore whether results have resonance with the participants' experience, using the analysed data. MC often takes place several months after the data collection event (Birth et al, 2016).
- MC also referred to as respondent validations or respondent interviews, are regarded by many as the most important technique for establishing credibility. MC provide participants and researchers opportunities to summarize, clarify, discuss, and elaborate the findings during data analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).
- MC as a method of rigor: “ensuring that the participants’ own meanings and perspectives are represented and not curtailed by the researchers’ own agenda and knowledge” (Tong et al., 2007, p. 356).

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# Member checks: a literature review

- MC enhances rigor in qualitative research, proposing that credibility is inherent in the accurate descriptions or interpretations of phenomena (Lincoln and Guba, 1985)
- “Good” research clearly reports how methods are contextualized within methodological and theoretical paradigms. Different ways of undertaking MC might be more appropriate for some methodologies than others (Buus and Agdal, 2013)
- Researchers have noted concerns about MC credibility (Morse 2015), implementation (Carlson, 2010), ethics (Buchbinder 2011), impact on participant and researcher interactions (Harvey 2015), application with unique or vulnerable populations (Doyle 2007), sensitive topics, and philosophical or ontological interactions (Varpio et al. 2017).



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# Member checking activities

- Participants should be empowered to decide how they would like to receive MC documents (Carlson, 2010).
- Researchers have used MC in a variety of ways such as a conceptualized conversation (Flick 2007; Inman, Howard, and Hill 2012) where researcher(s) send participant(s) a general or coded interview transcript with instructions asking participant(s) to verify researchers' accuracy and clarity in interpreting the data (Charmaz 2006; Harper and Cole 2012). Other types of MC included returning the interview transcript to participants, an interview using the interview transcript data or interpreted data, a MC focus group, or returning analyzed synthesized data.
- Others have achieved credibility by using MC with peers or colleagues rather than participants (Mazerolle, Bowman, and Benes 2014).

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# Ethical considerations of member checking

- Extensive ethical attention is given to how researchers protect participants during data collection (Dickenson-Swift et al, 2007). Yet similar attention is rarely afforded to the process of MC even though the researcher might not be present when the participant receives the data. There is the potential for distress in that occasionally a participant might not recognize their personal experience and be left feeling isolated and unheard. It is important that opportunities are provided for participants to reply and liaise with researchers during this process (Birth et al, 2016).
- Estroff (1995) queries whether participants fully engage with research results or whether they merely accept the researcher's representations of the data. If the levels of engagement in MC are not reported, we risk tokenistic involvement of participants and exaggerated claims about the transferability of the data.

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# Epistemology-driven member checking

- Deepen researcher-participant relationships allows for a more complex and flexible presentation of research findings (Soini and Kronqvist 2011).
- A focus on epistemology and one's interpretations of his epistemology help researchers address power imbalances, prior relationships with participants, language barriers, and communication patterns (Buchbinder 2011; Harvey 2015).
- Since understanding of one's experience can happen in many subjective ways, each person's role should be discussed across all phases of the research process (Carlson 2010). This kind of more equitable relationship with an awareness of each member's epistemological context can allow space for multiple perspectives on the phenomena under investigation in ways that are aligned with the tenants of qualitative research.

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# Challenges with member checking

- Absence of detail is surprising, as MC might be confounded by epistemological and methodological challenges. These include the changing nature of interpretations of phenomena over time; the ethical issue of returning data to participants, the dilemma of anticipating and assimilating the disconfirming voices, and deciding who has ultimate responsibility for the overall interpretation (Birth et al, 2016).
- There is limited empirical research about the experiences of participants engaging in qualitative research along participant and researcher relationship dynamics (Dennis, 2014).
- Studies provide little information about how MC impacted the findings (Thomas. 2017). It is difficult to understand how much rigour MC add to studies without further exploration of how and why participants engage in them. Thomas (2017) adds that routine MC did little to enhance credibility or trustworthiness of qualitative research.

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# Relationship dynamics and challenges

- Researchers felt vulnerable when handing over their interpretations of the participants' data (Buchbinder, 2011).
- Researchers should openly discuss power dynamics and negotiate each person's role in the research project (Buchbinder, 2011). To inspire deeper conversations, researchers should provide clear and specific instructions to participants about MC procedures (Carlson 2010; Doyle 2007; Harvey 2015)
- Stronger qualitative research demands aligning multiple research components. Incorporating epistemology that permeates all components of a research design provides helps create more unique and cohesive research. Without aligning epistemology throughout the qualitative research designs, researchers may harm the credibility of their findings and complicate their relationship with participants (Doyle 2007).

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# Power

- Numerous barriers exist to open discussions between researchers and participants. There is often an inherent disconnect between researchers and participants in terms of knowledge and power (Madill and Sullivan, 2017)
- Traditional power dynamics in qualitative research privilege the researcher and explain why participants are likely to provide more agreeable feedback during MC (Dennis 2014). Participants also may forget some of the content of their interview or their experiences in the time that elapses between the data collection and the MC (Reilly 2013).
- Participants may have a wide variety of motivations when agreeing to MC, including wishing to gain sympathy from the researcher, rationalizing their behaviour, or protecting themselves (Bloor, 2004). Participants may also use MC as a way of censoring or withdrawing information from the study that maybe be viewed in a negative light by others (Thomas 2017).

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# Member-checking is incongruent with phenomenology

- Interpretive researchers have often adopted terminology, such as reliability, validity, credibility and generalisability, as a way to establish rigour. McConnell-Henry (et al 2009a, 2009b) recommend that interpretive researchers would benefit from establishing the foundations of rigour for themselves, rather than being pressured into attempting to fit into the language used by positivists.
- Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Colaizzi (1978) advocated the use of MC as a final step in validation. The brief of phenomenological research is to develop a comprehension of what it is like to live experiences. An interpretation can alter, depending on the context in which it is viewed. There is no directive in interpretive research to prove or generalise, so the idea of validation is illogical.
- Taylor (1995) agreed, saying that when she fully understood the principles, such as multiple truths, that Heidegger espoused, she saw that MC was incongruent with this philosophy.

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# Rigour and the halo effect

- Revisiting a participant for clarification is a potential threat to the rigour of interpretive studies. When asked to revisit a concept, a participant may overemphasise it, believing the researcher must think it important or relevant to the study. The desire of participants to say 'the right thing' is known as the 'halo effect'.
- By going away, examining and carefully considering the data, then returning to participants for clarification, researchers may then guide the participants in the directions they desire. As the balance of power is heavily in the researcher's favour, a participant is unlikely to resist the direction in which the researcher is leading them. Equally, returning to participants is antithetical to phenomenology's requirement that a recounting is presented in native, or original, form and that it considers a snapshot in time, not a generalisable right answer.



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# Re-entering the field

- Re-entering the field to acquire more data does not necessarily equate to obtaining richer data. Additional information can even dilute the true essence of the experiences, subtracting from the richness of the data (Taylor,1995).
- Offering full power to the participants by returning to them risks the entire project being placed in jeopardy. Participants may not agree with the researcher's interpretation or, may change their minds. This could place undue pressure on the researcher to change completely the focus of the interpretation, endangering either the integrity of the study. Participants may feel embarrassed or even want to withdraw from the study when faced with their transcripts.
- Time delays between the initial contacts with participants and subsequent dealings can influence the recounting of respondents' stories. Heidegger's notion that time, space and context are pivotal renders the idea of follow-up interviews invalid. Whitehead (2004) echoed Heidegger's belief that experience is relative to context, concluding that re-interviewing was outside the philosophical tradition supported by Heidegger.

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# Reflective thoughts – Avoid wasting time!

- Evaluate whether the method fits with the theoretical position of a study. It is necessary to consider how MC is undertaken and for what purpose. Researchers must be transparent about what they hope to achieve with the method and how their claims about credibility and validity fit with their epistemological stance (Birth, 2016).
- Before using MC, researchers need to be clear on the relevance and value of the method within their design; they need to have strategies for dealing with the disconfirming voice, and to have considered whether they have the resources or willingness to undertake further analyses if participants do not agree with their analysis (Birth, 2016).
- Just as qualitative researchers do not seek to discover objective truth, MC should not be approached in a way that assumes the possibility of absolute representation (Koelsch 2013.)

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# THANK YOU



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