

In response to Porter S. Validity, trustworthiness and rigour: reasserting realism in qualitative research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 60 (1), 79–86

Validity and the fabrication of truths: a response to Porter

Sam Porter (2007) raises some challenging points with regard to my paper. Porter's critique is in two parts: in the first, he argues against my 'sceptical' reading of nursing research, and in the second he puts forward his own 'realist' position. One of the key points in his argument is that the content of a research report is not determined or restricted by its form, and that skilled authors should be able to get across their message equally well in a 5000 word research report – or a 17 syllable haiku. However, the constraints imposed by the 'JANForum' section of the journal limits my response to 1000 words and four references. This precludes a detailed response to Porter's substantive and well-referenced second section on realism.

Unfortunately
Despite Porter's claims to the
contrary, the haiku

The haiku form, with its insistence on 17 syllables, is not sufficient for my needs either. With length and number of references restricted, I will concentrate on correcting and responding to a number of misreadings and misrepresentations of my text in Porter's first section. I will save my more detailed and more extensively referenced response to Porter's realism for a separate paper.

Firstly, Porter objects to the assertion in my paper that research reports do not, in Sandelowski's words, offer 'factual accounts of events or attitudes'. If this were indeed the case, then I can see how Porter might arrive at his conclusion that, according to my account, research is not 'about' anything and does not provide 'beneficial information'. Unfortunately, he has misunderstood the constructivist use of the term 'fact' by implying that it presumes 'facts' to exist in the world, waiting to be uncovered and transmitted in research reports as 'factual information'. For the constructivist, however, researchers gather and disseminate information and (less often) theories, and facts are co-constructed (or, to use Porter's rather disparaging term, 'fabricated') from that information or deduced from the theories by academic communities of readers and researchers. What we refer to as 'facts' are therefore the

writer's and readers' *jointly agreed* best approximations to the truth, and these are always open to refutation and replacement by new 'facts'. For Porter, however, the role of the reader extends no further than accepting or rejecting the prefabricated 'factual account' of the researcher.

Secondly, Porter suggests that I am setting up 'a false dichotomy' by contrasting my view that responsibility for appraising research lies with the reader, with 'what [Rolfe] portrays as the traditional view of Morse...' that validity lies solely with the writer. It is, he implies, a false dichotomy because Morse does not actually hold such a view. However, he overlooks my citation from Morse that, if the researcher follows a number of 'verification strategies', then:

the rigor of the qualitative inquiry should be beyond question, beyond challenge, and provide pragmatic scientific evidence that must be integrated into our developing knowledge base. (Morse *et al.* 2002, p.13, cited in Rolfe 2006)

This would appear to be a bald and straightforward statement by Morse that the reader has no part to play in judging the validity of the study, which is 'beyond question, beyond challenge...'. I am therefore completely mystified how this dichotomy between my view and 'the traditional view of Morse' can possibly be described as false.

Furthermore, I do not claim, as Porter suggests, that *sole* responsibility lies with the reader, which entails 'absolving researchers of their responsibility to establish rigour'. If we accept Sandelowski's argument that validity is linked to trustworthiness – rather than to truth or the 'facts' – then clearly, researchers have a role to play in writing a persuasive and coherent account of their findings. However, *by definition*, validity depends on the research report being trusted by the reader. As I pointed out in my paper: 'a study is trustworthy if and only if the reader of the research report judges it to be so'. This does not, however, absolve writers from their part in the process.

Thirdly, I suggest that Porter's ready dismissal of the idea of 'aesthetic appraisal' is prompted by a misunderstanding of my use of the term. An aesthetic appraisal, as outlined by literary and art theorists, is not a 'gut feeling' or groundless judgement

about a study, but is similar to Carper's notion of aesthetic knowledge, which, as cited in my paper (Rolfe 2006), involves 'the exercise of wise judgement and keen insight in recognizing the nature and merits of a work'. This aesthetic judgement is presented as an alternative to Morse's view of the negation of any judgement by the reader, who must accept the rigor and validity of the research report as 'beyond question'.

Porter's misunderstanding of the term 'aesthetic', as employed in my paper, allows him to claim that I am establishing an 'aesthetic elite'. Furthermore, he can then claim that my assertion that the *practice* of research is best judged by *practitioners* of research bestows power and responsibility upon a 'cognoscenti' of experienced researchers. His use of the word 'cognoscenti' reinforces my view that he has misunderstood my point, as it suggests a small elite who are 'in the know' rather than, as I suggest in my paper, a broad community of experienced researchers who are able to make appraisals based on their 'wise judgements and keen insights'.

Porter outlines two consequences of this position which he considers unacceptable. First, 'even novice researchers are ruled out of court' as being able to make wise and informed judgements about the conduct and validity of the practice of research. This, in my opinion, is as it should be: wise judgements require experience and expertise. Secondly, he claims, 'non-research-active clinicians are not even mentioned as possible recipients of research information. One wonders where this leaves evidence-based practice...'. My point, however, is not about the 'recipients of research information' as Porter puts it. All clinicians can receive 'research information' merely by reading research reports. My point was not about *receiving* research information but about *appraising* research reports, which is a completely different issue. Furthermore, by linking the issue of evidence-based practice with 'recipients of research

information', Porter perhaps betrays a rather conservative, not to mention paternalistic, view of the nature of 'evidence' and its relationship to practice and practitioners.

The problem is that Porter imposes on my paper his own realist definition of validity as 'the extent to which research reflects accurately that to which it refers'. If this realist view is accepted, *then*, as he points out, none of my suggestions 'provide a viable alternative to validity'. Thus, his dismissal of my position as 'nothing more than a fabrication' conflicts with the constructivist view that 'fabrication' is all that we have, and contains a realist value judgement that the function of research is to reflect a 'reality' behind the social construction of knowledge. Clearly, I do not share this view of being able to 'hold up a mirror to nature' (Rorty 1979) (which is not, of course, to say that I do not believe in a 'reality' behind our constructs). However, that debate, as I said at the outset, will have to wait for another occasion and a more expansive format.

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