



Audit Trail

Definition

An audit trail is a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a research project to the development and reporting of findings. These are records that are kept regarding what was done in an investigation.

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 319-310) cite Halpern's (1983) categories for reporting information when develop an audit trail:

- **Raw data** - including all raw data, written field notes, unobstrusive measures (documents)
- **Data reduction and analysis products** - including summaries such as condensed notes, unitized informaiton and quantitative summaries and theoretical notes
- **Data reconstruction and synthesis products** - including structure of categories (themes, definitions, and relationships), findings and conclusions and a final report including connections to existing literatures and an integration of concepts, relationships, and interpretations
- **Process notes** - including methodological notes (procedures, designs, strategies, rationales), trustworthiness notes (relating to credibility, dependability and confirmability) and audit trail notes
- **Materials relating to intentions and dispositions** - including inquiry proposal, personal notes (reflexive notes and motivations) and expectations (predictions and intentions)
- **Instrument development information** - including pilot forms, preliminary schedules, observation formats

Importance of creating and reporting one's audit trail

There are a range of approaches that can be utilized in qualitative analysis.

It is important to have a clear description of the research path. This should include research design and data collection decisions and the steps taken to manage, analyze and report data.

This should include information about sampling, clarification of the role of different research team members as well as the role of different data sources.

Reporting should also include a rationale for these decisions.

With regard to data analysis, Malterud (2001) underscores the need for one to provide a detailed report of the analytical steps taken in a study when she write:

"Declaring that qualitative analysis was done, or stating that categories emerged when the material had been read by one or more persons, is not sufficient to explain how and why patterns were notice... the reader needs to know the principles and choices underlying pattern recognition and category foundation."
(p. 486)

References

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