Knowing it and showing it:
A personal reflection on validity and generalizability
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All you are doing is story-telling. I could talk to the same teachers and come back to tell a very different story than you did. How can anyone trust your version of the story?

While conducting my first qualitative inquiry, in which I interviewed six elementary teachers, I faced many questions about how I could interpret these teacher’s stories in a way that others would consider trustworthy and meaningful. I was most interested in learning about these teachers’ experiences, in understanding their stories, how they worked in their schools, and how their collegial relationships helped shape their professional lives. To get this contextualized and personal information, I had to get to know the teachers personally. This illustrates the paradox of qualitative research. We want to understand deeply what we are studying, which requires that we become intimate with the subject or phenomenon. At the same time, we must be aware of and cautious of our own subjectivity because we run the risk of projecting our framework onto the data. This is not to say that we strive for objectivity. It is to say that understanding our own subjectivity becomes even more important to our interpretations and findings. During this study, I felt insecure about exercising my own “interpretive license” in crafting the interpretations from a rigorous analysis of the raw data. And I learned that I had many questions like the one stated earlier about the validity of my own research endeavors.

While engaged in that initial study, I constructed several responses to questions of validity—responses for myself as well as for the skeptics of the methods of qualitative research. My first response is to agree that different people can observe the same situation and construct different stories out of the same situation. The movie Rashomon, the first great film by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa, is a wonderful illustration of how four people involved in the same incident can retell the story from their individual perspectives. Taken individually, each person’s account was a different story; taken together, each person’s story illuminated the situation and their own role, painting a rich picture of the situation. Another example—I’ve recently read a book titled Wicked, by Gregory Maguire, which retells the story of the Wizard of Oz from the perspective of the Wicked Witch of the West. Even though the author invokes creative license to tell the life of this infamous character, I walked away from the story having to rethink my understanding of the relationships among Dorothy, the Munchkins, and the Wicked Witch, and asking myself just who was the Wizard of Oz after all?

Given that different perspectives result in different tellings, we must then ask ourselves is this a liability or a blessing? My perspective is: the more the better! Bring on the different perspectives. Illuminate the story again with light from a different angle. Enrich the story with more complexity. Historians do this for us all the time. What was the cause of the American Revolution? Is it the same story when told from the perspectives of British nobility as when it’s told from the perspectives of Colonial homesteaders? If we are in the business of wanting to
understand and know, then we should be open to interpretations of situations from as many perspectives as we can find.

I’ve also constructed a set of reminders for me about my responsibilities as a member of a research community that has established standards for conducting and reporting research. Casting these as responsibilities reminds me of my active role as a reflective practitioner of qualitative research.

First, other researchers should be able to locate my study in time, in place, and in method. My methods and sources of data collection must be outlined, not for the purposes of replication, but for the purposes of validity. My responsibility to readers of my research is to make the procedures of my study explicit and transparent. Others have the responsibility to be skeptical and to question how members of the research community draw their conclusions.

Second, I cannot rely solely on a single source of data. It is my responsibility to check for the validity of a conclusion based on one data source by seeking additional data sources that will corroborate or refute the findings from a single data source. Triangulating from multiple data sources ensures a rigorous analysis and allows me to base my conclusions on a wall of evidence found in the data.

And third, we all come to qualitative data analysis with our own experiences that frame, highlight, mask, and filter what we see and hear while collecting and analyzing data. If I choose to report my findings from a particular perspective, then I must clearly explicate my perspective. If I am not certain about my perspective, then I am still responsible for telling as much as I know about my own subjectivity that may have bearing on my interpretation. Just as the methods must be transparent, the conceptual and subjective boundaries around my interpretation must also be explicit.

Another related question I faced in this first endeavor as a qualitative researcher was how my study would inform others. How could I claim that the experiences of my six teachers could offer any insight into the professional practices of others when there are so many others whom I know nothing about? The teachers in my study were not a random representation of all teachers, they were not selected as exemplary or award-winning teachers, and they were not particularly unique teachers. Yet both individually and collectively they offered experiences, perspectives, and understandings from which I was certain others could learn. How could I argue that these experiences were worth paying attention to? My questions were aimed directly at the notion of generalizability.

Generalizability seems like such a big idea—with its 16 letters and 8 syllables. I have found many definitions of generalizability in methodology texts. For example, Lee Shulman sums it up as
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“the degree to which findings derived from one context or under one set of conditions may be assumed to apply in other settings or under other conditions” (Shulman, 1988, p. 9). This seems pretty straightforward—from the results of one study you want to make some statements of understanding about other situations that are similar. My job is to build an “inferential bridge” (Shulman, 1988; drawing upon Cornfield & Tukey, 1956) between my study and other similar contexts or situations. How do I build this bridge starting with a foundation of only six teachers?

From my background in geological sciences, I understand the logic behind seeking generalizable results by selecting a random sample that is considered representative of a particular population. If I want to describe the sand on a particular beach, I am certainly not going to compile a list of each individual grain’s characteristics. Rather, I use a specially designed “sorting machine” to take a random sample so that the size and shape of the grains in my sample will be representative of the larger population of grains on the beach. As a novice educational researcher, however, I still struggle with the question: What does it mean to generalize from a qualitative study with a non-representative sample?

One way to generalize is to seek overarching principles that apply to all cases. For example, the law of gravity applies to bodies of mass no matter where they are on the planet earth or in the solar system. Are there other ways to generalize? Other degrees of generalizing? Rather than thinking about capital G generalize, I have come to understand that there are different kinds of small g generalize.

I attended a dissertation defense two years ago. Elliott Eisner asked the candidate (who happened to be a friend of mine) a question: “You’ve worked with four young, female teachers in your study and you’ve described these teachers and their authority in their schools and classrooms beautifully. Now, are you suggesting that what you’ve told us about these teachers applies to other teachers? On what basis would you make that claim?” My friend looked at Elliot, knowing that he had an answer to his own question in his head, but she was at a loss for words. Elliot went on to prompt her about her experiences as an English teacher. Did she think that kids took away meaning from the novels she asked them to read? On what basis would she make the claim that a reader can relate to the life of Holden Caulfield, Juliette, or Captain Ahab.

I thought about these questions for days and days. How is it that I can read about someone else’s life, or listen to someone else’s concerns, and feel like I can relate to them? I have never been an adolescent boy, or a teenage bride, or a sea captain, yet I empathize with these characters. I have felt some of the things they felt because I share some of their emotions, their desires, and their morals. These shared experiences allow me, as an individual, to draw inferences from the characters’ life experiences to my own life experiences. Their struggles and triumphs allow me to examine my own struggles and triumphs. Is there something about lived experiences that others relate to? To “relate to” means that you have taken an occasion or instance and identified
similarities or commonalities to another occasion or instance, thus the act of relating to something is a degree of generalizing—a relational generalizability.

I knew that I was not trying to demonstrate that by knowing six teachers’ stories I would know about all teachers stories. In other words, I was not trying to generalize the individual. I came to realize that it is the experiences of these six teachers that could be generalized. Others might be able to relate to the relationships, the tensions, the accomplishments, and the routine that these six teachers individually describe. I realized that I had been focusing on the wrong question about the teaches in my study. I had been asking “are my teachers representative of other teachers.” My question now is “what are these teachers’ experiences representative of among teachers?”

To achieve this kind of relational generalizability, the research must communicate the contextual details in order to create an understanding of the person’s richly nuanced story. Two examples demonstrate the importance of describing the context of the research situation in a qualitative study. First, compare the traditional methods of quantitative research. We’ve been eating all week in New Orleans restaurants—a city known for its cuisine. I could report my dining experiences qualitatively by describing the key features of each dish, the combinations of dishes that created a meal, the choice of wines that complemented each dish, and the atmosphere of the restaurant. On the other hand, I could describe my experience quantitatively by taking all the meals, pureeing them in a conceptual blender, and reporting their contents as 15% fats, 40% protein, 40% carbohydrates, 5% vegetables. This latter description offers no hint of common experiences in eating to which a reader can relate.

Another way to draw the comparison is to examine the degree of telling within qualitative research. Using our literary examples from above, a reader leaves with a greatly different sense of the contextualized experiences of characters when they read the novel or play opposed to reading summaries or reviews. The Cliff Notes™ version of Catcher in the Rye, for example, reads something like: boy gets kicked out of school, spends time in Manhattan. This summary fails to elicit empathy with the character, and thus fails to generalize.

In conclusion, I have come to understand the complementary nature of methodological validity and the potential for generalization. Contextualized interpretations from multiple data sources result from the careful attention to validity in the telling of the story and richly contextualized, deeply nuanced tellings increase the potential of relational generalizability.
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References
