Ethnographic and Qualitative Research in Education: Volume 2
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In the early 1970’s I was an undergraduate student in a small department of teacher education in the rural Midwest. The “cadet” certificates were being phased out in the state, and many of my fellow students were returning teachers with plenty of practical experience in the classroom, oftentimes documenting years of teaching service that exceeded that of our professors. Education courses were focused on instructional methods and the classroom environment, with little exposure to educational theory and supporting research. What little I knew about educational research consisted of quantitative studies that focused on student performance, frequently measured against behavioral objectives or grant-funded program evaluations. But the research rarely addressed issues that I confronted in my beginning years as an elementary school teacher.

In the past 30 years educational research has expanded, but the following question has become a source of tension in the profession: “What constitutes significant research in education?” The validity of educational research often is framed within the quantitative-qualitative debate: quantitative methods are closely tied to “objective” theory and are presumed to produce unbiased and significant results, while qualitative methods are identified as context-specific, therefore more subjective and potentially less rigorous. This volume, with papers taken from the 18th Annual Ethnographic and Qualitative Research in Education conference, exemplifies some of education’s best approaches to qualitative inquiry by focusing on what Marvin Peterson (2000) calls in higher education a “trichotomy - the relationship among our theory-research-practice orientation” (p. 23).

The present volume begins with Annette Hemmings’ keynote address, “Where Thunder Strikes” in which she brings another dimension to the theory-research-practice connection. Hemmings calls upon qualitative researchers to appropriately align theory with data in order to expand measures of methodological rigor. Instead of conducting convenient, and perhaps less rigorous qualitative research that is prematurely tied to an existing theoretical
framework, Hemmings suggests scrutinizing ethnographic and qualitative research methods in order to develop a “more revelatory educational knowledge” that can be used to describe, and improve, what we know about education and schooling.

Contributors in the first section of the book continue to explore themes that advance the integrity of qualitative inquiry. Firmin approaches this task by juxtaposing a key construct of quantitative inquiry, external validity, with measures that he argues can be appropriately connected to the qualitative setting. While acknowledging distinct differences between the two approaches, Firmin encourages adaptation of some traditional aspects of quantitative inquiry in order to promote and extend the integrity of qualitative methods. Olsen and Raffanti describe two examples of grounded learning, a pedagogical construct that relies heavily on grounded theory principles and active engagement by the student, and Owusu-Ansah focuses on the application of lived experience, a phenomenological approach that is often underrepresented in educational research. The section ends with Raffanti’s discussion of “groundedness,” a compelling summary of Glaserian, Straussian, constructivist, and situationalist approaches to the method. The paper could be required reading for any student of grounded theory.

The numbers of students in K-12 classrooms who are Limited English Proficient are increasing annually and Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESOL) initiatives abound nationwide. Mandated services in bilingual education have been a federal initiative for over forty years, and there is no lack of research on TESOL programs, instructor training, and need. Included in this book are three contributions on this topic, each of which takes an alternative, socio-cultural perspective on the status of TESOL in the United States today. Kessinger provides a description of an Ohio Japanese Language School, which is supported by the Japanese government and is intended to supplement schooling provided by U.S. public schools. Macbeth, Capraro, and Abe each show the co-constructive nature of learning as they describe the perspectives taken by students in three distinctive ESL environments. Obeng and Obeng conclude this section with a study of African immigrant families and their perceptions of children’s successes in ESL classrooms in rural Indiana.

Four authors study the connections among education, qualitative research, and human services. Giesler explores gender roles and expectations evident in the educational experiences of male social workers and identifies both educational and career services implications for the academy. In the only mixed methods contribution in the collection, Palladino describes a study, and accompanying survey tool, that can be used to identify the needs of youth in foster care relative to special education services. Wantz, Firmin, and Johnson in one study, and Nabors in the second, address challenges faced by school-based
counselors. Wantz, et al., note the continuing student perception that high school counselors serve primarily as “guidance” personnel who provide career and educational services, while Nabors advances our understanding of therapy interventions that can be used to develop school-based mental health programs.

The collection is please to offer alternative examples of “What Works” in instructional improvement, documented through qualitative inquiry. Hampton presents the second year of qualitative study in which he explores creative problem solving for general education intervention. Parrott and Iannucci use cognitive interview methodology to collect data that will build toward theory development for question-response analysis in disability assessment. Best practice research in elementary schools is explored through the National Center for Educational Accountability’s Just for the Kids framework, with qualitative data gathered through intensive site visits. Winslow’s review of elements of success in post-certification, in-service mathematics education closes the section, as an example of how both the content and mode of delivery can impact the success of professional development initiatives.

The volume concludes with a series of reports on culture and environment, echoing some of Hemmings’ additional themes from the keynote address. While we often speak of culture in terms of broad societal implications or cross-cultural aspects, there are cultural influences evident in educational organizations and among the players in those organizations. Adler’s study of teacher choices for literacy instruction in the Philippines and Cherubini’s discourse analysis of the experiences of beginning teachers in Canada do not necessarily provide us with an international perspective. Instead, they contribute to a greater explanation of teacher perspectives and behaviors within the culture of the school environment. Kammerer and Weiler continue this probe through a discussion of pre-service teacher responses to curriculum development and management as framed by three distinctive educational philosophies. In the closing ethnography, Phenice, et al. provide an analysis of the environments that surround twenty-four Detroit public schools, providing perhaps the most compelling discussion of the role that education, as outlined by Hemmings in the keynote address, contributes to schooling.

What constitutes significant research in education? Peterson’s trichotomy provides one response, in that significance can be identified through the connection of theory, research, and practice. Ethnographic and qualitative research can contribute systematically to this trichotomy in that it honors both the educational context and the genuine perspectives of those who live within it.
References


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CHAPTER TWO

WHERE THUNDER STRIKES:
AFFIRMING THE PLACE OF THEORY
AND METHODOLOGICAL RIGOR IN EDUCATIONAL
ETHNOGRAPHIC AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

ANNETTE HEMMINGS

Keynote Address presented at the 18th Annual Conference on
Ethnographic and Qualitative Research in Education (EQRE),
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Many years ago, I was a social studies teacher in an Upward Bound
program for American Indian high school students. Most of the students were
Ojibwa, Menominee, Winnebago, Potawatomi, and Mohican Indians living on
Wisconsin reservations. A few were from tribes in neighboring states. Advising
students was one of our responsibilities as teachers. One of my advisees was a
Sioux Indian from South Dakota who everyone called “Horse” because he
horsed around in class. My colleagues constantly complained about Horse and
the Director, a no-nonsense Menominee, asked me to deliver an ultimatum to
him: either shape up or get shipped out. I could have conducted a quick meeting
in my office but I decided to handle the situation in an entirely different way. I
asked Horse if he wanted to go fishing. It was an offer he could not refuse.

I picked up Horse on a blistering hot Saturday morning and took him to
a lake where I had a fishing boat ready with tackle boxes and a shore lunch. We
got in the boat and went to well-known fishing spots and some of my own secret
ones. We threw in our lines and did not get a single bite. Neither of us said
much during our failed efforts to catch fish. We both knew the real reason for
the excursion and were not very comfortable about talking about it. Finally I
said, “You know why I invited you to go fishing with me.” Horse nodded his
head. “The Director is going to send you home if you don’t stop horsing around
in class.” Horse pondered the ultimatum for a moment. “I’m going to tell you
who I really am,” he said, and proceeded to do just that.

Horse told me he was not getting anything out of the Upward Bound
program or, for that matter, public high school. He was getting a much better
Annette Hemmings

education from a Sioux medicine man who was teaching him the difference between following red and black paths. The red path leads to the Great Spirit where people are in harmony with nature and each other. The black path leads to evil spirits where people are separated, do bad things, or are destroyed by drugs and alcohol. Those who follow the red path have red thunder in their voices. They are knowledgeable, wise, and good. People following the black path speak evil words charged with black thunder. They are dangerous and should be avoided. “My name is Red Thunder,” my fishing partner said, and “I want to be a medicine man.”

Red Thunder then spoke about the rites and rituals he had to endure in order to become a medicine man. One was a modified version of the Sun Dance outlawed by the federal government several years ago. Young men during the original dance had thongs inserted into their breasts, were hoisted up on poles by ropes, and left hanging as they struggled through excruciating pain to free themselves from the thongs. Once free, they were healed by women and honored by the rest of the tribe. The modified version, the details of which Red Thunder could not disclose, was a less torturous but powerful rite of passage.

As I listened to Red Thunder, I was transformed from a White teacher trying to rein in a deviant Indian kid into someone participating in the remarkable life quest of a young Sioux man. We lapsed into silence for awhile and then Red Thunder said, “I have been praying for fish to come. It’s time for you to pray. In Sioux tradition, a woman’s prayer is stronger than a man’s prayer.” I asked him how I should pray. “Sing a song to the fish,” he explained, “telling them that you and I would like them to join us and that we will put them back after their visit.” He sang a Sioux song, I picked up the rhythm, and sang my prayer to the fish. Within two minutes, I hooked a 12” small mouth bass. This is an amazing feat even in the most optimal fishing conditions. Both of us, Red Thunder and I, cheered with excitement. We passed the fish back and forth then released it into the water. We headed back to shore where we shared food, told more stories, and shared our knowledge about life in general and our life quests in particular.

Red Thunder was sent home later that week. I saw him a few times before he left and we became what we had become the day we went fishing. Then we parted ways.

The Place of Theory

I headed off to the University of Wisconsin to pursue doctoral studies in Educational Policy Studies with an emphasis in educational anthropology. I was especially interested in how cultural differences affect the educational paths of ethnic and racial minority high school students. I delved into the literature
and learned how to “do” ethnography in school settings. It soon became apparent that much of the research in my field focused on ethnic and racial minority student underachievement patterns with a great deal of attention paid to horse-like student resistance. Many educational anthropologists at the time made an essential distinction between education and schooling that continues to inform my thinking. Education occurs in families, peer associations, neighborhoods, ethnic and racial communities, churches, clubs, workplaces, and other social spaces where people must acquire some level of cultural competence in local languages, values, norms, and mores in order to navigate their worlds. Schooling, as John Singleton (1974) explains, is a “ritualized affirmation” of oral language usage, literacy, mathematics, and other knowledge rooted in Anglo and Western European academic traditions. This knowledge enables individuals to become what Levinson and Holland (1996) refer to as the “educated person” or, I would suggest, a “schooled person” rich with the cultural capital necessary to pursue, or retain, high social and economic status.

Not everyone succeeds at becoming a schooled person. Most of us in educational anthropology and sociology know that school success and failure are very much affected by social class, ethnicity, race, gender, and other social and cultural factors. We also know that kids like Red Thunder are much more likely to become alienated in schools than are white middle-class youths.

These socio-cultural facts constitute the bases of a succession of theoretical frameworks including those focusing on cultural and genetic deficits; home/school cultural differences; neo-Marxist social reproduction and resistance; cultural reproduction; cultural ecology; cultural production; cultural studies; critical theories; various feminisms; post-structuralism, post-modernism, and so on and so forth. While these frameworks are very insightful, they tend to position students, teachers, and other people as victims or perpetrators of educational injustices and/or acting in predictable or highly constrained ways.

Take, for example, the succession of theories that position students, especially working-class youths and kids of color, as horses. Paul Willis (1977) in the 1970s used neo-Marxist social reproduction theory to explain how working-class lads in an English high school horsed around, and reproduced social inequalities, because they figured out that middle-class schooling was not meant for them. John Ogbu (1978; 1987; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) arrived on the scene in the 1980s with his groundbreaking cultural ecology theory. He argued that African Americans, American Indians, and other “involuntary minority” groups have formed collective oppositional identities in response to historical white discrimination and unequal social and institutional structures. Students within these groups resist schooling (horrible around) because they do not want to appear to be “acting white.” Teachers in other frameworks are described as
Annette Hemmings

complicit in perpetuating educational inequalities or as so overrun by resistant horses that they defend themselves by corolling students with worksheets at the expense of more meaningful lessons (McNeil, 1983). Contemporary theorists embracing post-modern/structural views situate students and teachers in more complex, fluid institutional discourses that shape relations of power and influence identity politics (Lather, 1991; Davidson, 1996; Gee, 2000-2001). But they also tend to portray students as horses and teachers as perpetuators of, or as possible liberators from, injustices.

I am in no way suggesting that we should ignore or down play the importance of theories. We simply cannot engage in thoughtful scholarship or address educational inequities without them. My concern is not with the theories per se, but, rather, with the tendency among ethnographic and qualitative researchers in education to put their theoretical carts before their data horses. Researchers become enamored with theories; embrace the latest theoretical fads in order to belong to the hippest theoretical crowds; or are the graduate students of faculty advisors who hand them theories they dare not refuse. Too much emphasis on front-loaded theory can cause researchers to ignore, distort, or misrepresent their data. And it can blind researchers to the fact that while social and institutional structures advantage some groups and disadvantage others, individuals possess agency and act in shifting, highly adaptable ways and do so in socio-cultural contexts that vary significantly within and between sites.

In my own ethnographic studies of how diverse high school students came of age in urban and suburban schools, I found that teenagers in different school contexts were navigating a myriad of multi-layered cultural crosscurrents including those streaming in from homes, popular culture, ethnic enclaves, and other culturally educational spaces (Hemmings, 2004). Existing theoretical frameworks did not adequately explain what I observed and heard, so I developed another explanatory framework that included new analytical interpretations supported by data as well as older ones drawn from theoretical precedents. In this way, I was able to make better sense of what the data were telling me. I, in other words, placed the data horses before theoretical carts where they belonged.

At the other extreme are ethnographic and qualitative studies where theory is virtually absent. Data horses are left standing without any plausible theoretical carts to explicate them. I am suspicious of researchers who claim they are doing “grounded theory” when, in fact, they are not. The procedures for generating grounded theories, as Strauss and Corbin (1990) explain in some detail, are sophisticated and often quite involved. But much of what scholars try to pass off as grounded theory is derived through unsophisticated or simplistic analyses of data. Theoretical claims are especially shaky when they are
grounded in skimpy data. This leads to my next concern about the demise of methodological rigor.

The Place of Methodological Rigor

When I was in graduate school, I had the opportunity to study with renowned educational ethnographers. They taught us that ethnographers doing research in school settings are tenacious if not adventurous in their pursuit of thick descriptive data on how school administrators, teachers, students, and other actors navigate the socio-cultural milieu of their schools, homes, and other worlds. Ethnographers who do rigorous research engage in participant observations in classrooms, corridors, and other natural settings; conduct open-ended formal and informal interviews with several “native” people; and gather relevant documents, pictures, art, artifacts, and other archival materials. As the primary instrument of data collection, they do their best to forge rapport with participants in order to uncover “emic” viewpoints on complex social and cultural phenomena. They interact with participants over a prolonged period of time rather than meet with them only once or twice for an hour or two. This is how they generate the thick and trustworthy data they need to make worthwhile contributions that benefit scholarship, policy, practice, and, hopefully, the people who participated in the research.

When qualitative research exploded on the educational research scene in the 1980s, these tried-and-true ethnographic traditions were modified to fit bounded case studies, practitioner action research, and other forms of inquiry. Unfortunately, the methodological rigor associated with ethnographic fieldwork was compromised by many would-be researchers who could not, or would not, design and carry out studies that yielded optimal kinds and amounts of data.

Among the reasons for the demise of rigor are logistics and convenience. Many qualitative researchers, especially graduate students who are working full time, cannot fit full-blown ethnographic fieldwork into their tight schedules or they have other logistical problems such as restricted access to research sites, little or no funding, and lack of help or support from others. They end up doing studies that may be more convenient for them but are less then optimal in terms of building up good data records. I have had graduate students in my research courses who wanted to propose dissertation studies where data collection was limited to single tape-recorded interviews with a handful of people or involved blitzkrieg fieldwork where they would spend only a few days in the field doing a couple of observations and interviews. While this makes the research process much easier, such designs do not facilitate the gathering of robust, well-triangulated data records. Researchers who do this sometimes end up putting a thick layer of theory over their incredibly thin data in order to make
their studies appear more substantial than they actually are. They put big theoretical saddles on top of meager data horses.

Institutional Review Boards (IRB) also have an impact on what and how ethnographic and qualitative data are collected. The IRB orientation towards applications of ethical principles has been largely modeled on standard clinical trials where it is assumed that researchers have clearly stated hypotheses, bounded relationships with their research subjects, procedures that can be described in some detail, and assessments of risks and benefits that are clear enough for subjects to be fully informed about them (Bosk and De Vries, 2004). The workings of IRBs are also very much affected by bureaucratic procedures that, among other things, are intended to head off legal liability for unethical research. This has led to methodological disputes between IRBs and ethnographic and qualitative researchers that have caused many scholars to revise their methodologies sometimes more than once (Anderson & Herr, 1999; Lincoln & Tierney, 2004; van den Hoonoord, 2002).

I have served on IRBs, had ethnographic protocols approved by them, have helped countless students and faculty through the approval process, and even written an article about bridging ethical divides (Hemmings, 2006). While IRBs may be burdensome, they do approve ethnographic and qualitative research especially studies that are rigorous. Using IRBs as an excuse for “quick and dirty” data collection methods is neither right nor fair. We need to stop making excuses and make sure we put theory in its rightful place in relation to data collected through methodologically rigorous means. And then maybe we can consider better ways to infuse red thunder into our presentations and publications.

Where Thunder Strikes

There are, of course, many ethnographic and qualitative researchers in education who are methodologically rigorous and do a fine job of applying or generating data-driven theories. Many are also very good at producing papers that have been accepted for presentation at conferences and publication in scholarly venues. The most astute writers pay close attention to the penchants of external reviewers, editors, and other gatekeepers and trend setters. It is not hard to find out what these penchants are. The American Educational Research Journal (AERJ) has two new editors who made it explicitly clear in a recent issue that they are interested in submissions that explicate social, institutional, and political roadblocks to student success. They want AERJ to “become known as a journal that moves the field of education forward toward creating equity of outcomes for all students” (Hollingsworth & Gallego, 2006, p. 3). The top journal in my field, Anthropology & Education Quarterly, devoted the
December 2005 issue to reflections on the past, present, and future of educational anthropology. Contributors urged educational ethnographers and qualitative researchers to “take specific actions to change an unjust world,” undertake “critical activist research,” and build on the precedents of trail blazers “committed to collaborative ethnography toward social justice ends” (McCarty, 2005, p. 302).

It behooves writers to foreground data and theories that cut the edges of these and other trends. But I challenge them, and you, to broaden your research horizons and look for, and write about, more revelatory educational knowledge, wisdom, and other kinds of red thunder as well as the destructive forces of black thunder. Resistance to mainstream schooling is almost doctrinal in my area of research. Many scholars place the horse-like resistance that appears in their data and theories before more thunderous illuminations. Or they do not go to the places where thunder strikes.

Thunder not only strikes in schools, but also in other educational spaces. If you focus too narrowly on unequal structural constraints and the limited agency of actors in schooling processes, you may miss or overlook the educations that are empowering or destroying people in homes, local communities, and broader societal spheres. If you adopt rigorous methods in your fieldwork and are theoretically open-minded, you may be able to discern the subtle nuances of thunder and how it is unleashed, contained, created, or annihilated within institutional and other structures. You may discover a wealth of red thunder guiding diverse people along different red paths or expose the black thunder leading people astray. In any event, your understanding of, and appreciation for, how people are really educated and schooled will surely deepen. Hopefully, your conference presentations and publications will move our data horses and theory carts into new realms of possibility including the intriguing possibility that a woman’s prayer really is stronger than a man’s prayer.

References


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CHAPTER THREE

EXTERNAL VALIDITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

MICHAEL W. FIRMIN

Abstract

This conceptual paper examines the concept of external validity as it applies to qualitative research. The nature of the construct, its necessity, and role are discussed. I argue that serious researchers should not and can not ignore this research component in publishable journal articles. Research can be valuable in its own right, but its usefulness to others partly depends on its degree to which findings can generalize to other settings. Limitations of external validity routinely should be included as part of qualitative research papers, including issues of external validity. Sample considerations for enhancing external validity in qualitative research are discussed and I advocate that replication is a key component to the over-arching construct of external validity in qualitative research.

Addressing the conceptual matter of external validity in qualitative research is a daunting task. Although I an unfamiliar with a book written specifically on this topic, certainly one could devote a monograph on this construct. In a relatively brief form, the present article establishes a rationale for qualitative researchers giving due consideration to the generalizability of their findings. I will make the case that without such consideration research loses its usefulness to the greater world of scholarship. If qualitative researchers are to gain and hold the respect of academe, then we must not simply dismiss important rules by which research is judged. We are not worlds unto ourselves in the academic community, but rather must function within the established structure and milieu.

The Nature of External Validity

Simply put, external validity refers to how findings from particular research studies can be generalized to other groups of people (Sarafino, 2005). Research texts and journal authors typically conceive internal validity as relating to how clean a study was done relative to findings that accurately match the
world of reality. External validity, in contrast, relates to how the implications of those findings are applied to various groups of people beyond the subjects studied. Internal validity, therefore, addresses credibility issues and external validity addresses application (Onwuegbuzie, 2000).

All agree that internal validity is essential for both quantitative and qualitative research, although Campbell (1986) notes that nomenclature sometimes varies when referencing these constructs. That is, if a research study is not done well or there are apt threats to internal validity, then the findings of a given study may be bogus. Obviously, results that people cannot trust as accurate are not placed before the academic community for application. Internal validity, therefore, can be thought of as a precursor or prerequisite for external validity. That is, if a research study does not possess sufficient internal validity, then external validity considerations are generally moot points (Gerdes, 2001).

External validity is more of a stand-alone construct than internal validity. That is, a study can possess adequate levels of internal validity—but McMillan and Wergin (2006) note that the findings can be unrelated to the needs or concerns of the rest of the world’s population. In this manner, a researcher’s findings may be apt explanations of a particular phenomenon, but this finding is so unique that the rest of the population has no concern for its application. As a concrete example, a researcher may study a crack addict, providing an adept explanation of this person’s world perspectives. The study, in other words would be assumed to possess adequate internal validity. However, if the crack addict was so unique that no other addict on planet earth had similar features to the person studied—then issues of external validity become salient.

Maxwell (1992) uses the phrase “understanding” in describing external validity as it relates to qualitative research. In his paradigm, descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, evaluative validities should be given particular attention when assessing qualitative research designs. Generalizability also is said by Maxwell to be parcel for all quality research designs. Graziano and Raulin (2004) also note that some experimentalists use the phrase ecological validity to describe the concept of generalizability from research to real-life situations. In short, although authorities sometimes use various terms for the notion of external validity, the construct is well established in the research literature as salient for research design.

The Necessity of External Validity in Qualitative Research

Not all researchers agree that external validity deserves attention in qualitative design. Johnson and Christensen (2004) write:
At a fundamental level, many qualitative researchers do not believe in the presence of ‘general laws’ or ‘universal laws.’ General laws are things that apply to many people, and universal laws are things that apply to everyone. As a result, qualitative research is frequently considered weak on the ‘generalizing across populations’ form of population validity (i.e., generalizing to different kinds of people), and on ecological validity (i.e., generalizing across settings), and on temporal validity (i.e., generalizing across times). (p. 255-256)

In this paradigm, qualitative researchers dismiss the notion of external validity. One does not address issues that are thought not to exist. If I do not believe in aliens coming from out of space, then I do not prepare my world for their invasion. Similarly, if I do not believe that principles generalize from one setting to another, then I do not design my research studies as if this principle operated in the world.

Johnson and Christensen (2004) continue that other researchers assume external validity is an important consideration to the research process:

Other experts argue that rough generalizations can be made from qualitative research. Perhaps the most reasonable stance toward the issue of generalizing is that we can generalize to other people, settings, times, and treatments to the degree to which they are similar to the people, settings, times, and treatments of the original study. (p. 256)

To this modus operandi, qualitative researchers do well in giving consideration to factors of matching participants in their sample to persons in the greater population. The logic is obvious. The greater the degree of similarity, the greater will be the degree of external validity. Since laws of generalization are assumed to exist in this paradigm, matching is considered an optimal research design characteristic.

Fighting presuppositions often proves futile. This does not imply that presuppositions are bad or that we should not possess them. In fact, it is impossible to live life—let alone conduct research—without presuppositions. Consequently, I will not here debate the issue of whether or not general or universal laws exist. Obviously, all researchers need to develop their own philosophies with respect to these fundamental assumptions—and respect those who differ from their own.

Rather, I will here address three more practical or pragmatic issues that I believe require qualitative researchers to address external validity in journal articles and conference presentations. First, quantitative researchers—for the most part—are in charge of the research flow (Henson, 1999). Nobody ever formally assigned them as the gatekeepers. Rather, they arrived first, they have impressive and sophisticated mathematical support for their research, and there is a certain intuitive support for quantitative approaches to conducting research.
True, there are some journals that are completely dedicated to publishing qualitative research. But, honestly, there are not very many. Rather, there are many more journals that publish only quantitative or at least quasi-experimental research designs. Perusing journals in most educational fields and simply counting the number of quantitatively-oriented and qualitatively-oriented journal articles makes this point clear. They (the quantitative people) are in charge.

Independent scholars can ignore this point. However, for those in academe who have needs for tenure, rank promotions, and the like—find that publishing at conference presentations to be the staple (or at least an important component) for realistic survival. That is, faculty who do not produce at least some measure of scholarly productivity do not survive, or at least become promoted and find themselves leaders in the academic world.

Research by Lounds et al. (2002) suggests that journal editors do, in fact, give attention to external validity issues when considering manuscripts for potential publication. The particular weight varies, of course, across a number of variables, but generally, editors do care about whether or not their readers will find research results applicable to other settings. This should not come as a great surprise, however. Journals must sell subscriptions in order to survive. While they are not market-driven as are some of the book publishers, there nonetheless is a need to sell issues. Additionally, journal editors rate their journals via means such as how many citations they receive per issue, the so-called high impact journal phenomenon. If a given journal routinely publishes articles with little external validity, it follows that it may receive fewer citations and begin a downward cycle toward becoming low-impact and low-status.

The summary of my first point here is the following: (a) Qualitative researchers need to become published; (b) quantitative researchers control most of the publication flow; (c) external validity is important to most quantitative researchers, including editors; (d) therefore, qualitative researchers should give apt attention to external validity in their research manuscripts.

Second, research is only partly about our own interests as researchers. Certainly, we do not wish to conduct studies on topics about which we have little interest. However, tickling our own fancy is not what research (at least idealistically) is about. Rather, research is about making professional contributions to knowledge. In the greater scheme of ken, we all are but small contributors to the greater good of humankind’s intellectual understanding. As academics, we have the privilege and responsibility of ensuring the knowledge pool remains fresh and active (Salkind, 2006).

In this light, when I conduct a research study—it has intrinsic value of its own right. That is, the study’s findings are valuable because I ascribe worth to them and somehow in the greater cosmos of my being, it is fulfilling. But the
value of research does not stop there—or at least it should not stop at that point. To be complete, research should be both valuable and useful.

Introducing this utilitarian model implies that research’s value is beyond my own benefit. Somehow, in the grander scheme of things, research produces some benefit for others. This benefit may be explicit or tacit, of course, and the benefit may not be immediately known by others. But there is some advantage to others when research is disseminated (Mills, 2003). This is the rationale behind journal publication and conference presentations. That is, researchers do not conduct studies, write papers, file them away, and move on to new studies. If a research study is going to be useful, then it needs exposure to peer-review, assessment, and appraisal. Findings that pass such tests help provide cornerstones for further findings as knowledge builds on itself.

Consequently, qualitative researchers must give apt attention to external validity if their research is to be useful. Knowing information about individuals in some aspect of education that is disconnected from the reality of other researchers may be interesting—but useful conclusions are the ones that will become the future foundations for advanced findings. To the degree that qualitative researchers wish to become players in leading the research world forward, they need to give apt attention to external validity in their projects.

Third, addressing external validity issues in qualitative research designs best sets-up the results for feeding quantitative follow-up studies. There are numerous means of conceptualizing the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research (Berg, 2001). Obviously, there is no one best model or a perspective that fits all interconnections between the two paradigms.

Here, however, I advocate that qualitative research best fits when it charts new research domains where theories are not yet developed. Quantitative research, inherently, tests hypotheses. Quantitative researchers do not blindly place people into control and experimental groups just to see what might happen as a result of the independent variable. Rather, investigators use the research literature to develop intelligent hypotheses, requiring mathematical assessments (statistics) to judge if the treatment variable affected individual(s) as expected (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 1998).

But what if the “expected” direction of change is unknown? Beyond research-fishing expeditions, apt research simply can not be conducted in such circumstances. Qualitative research, however, can provide results that are useful to the quantitative researchers. They generate useful theories, grounded in empirical data analysis, that the quantitative researchers later can use for hypothesis testing. In this model, qualitative researchers explore new inquiries, generating phenomenological understandings of their participants, and from that data draw generalizations or themes that lead to conclusions. Those conclusions
or findings later can be tested by quantitative researchers, assessing their level of robustness and ultimate generalizability to large populations.

In this model, qualitative research becomes the starting point for all research lines of inquiry. As such, qualitative researchers must give apt attention to expected levels of external validity. If it is expected to be nil, then obviously the usability of the findings later by quantitative researchers would be expected to be quite low. Conversely, if the qualitative research findings are expected to possess strong external validity, then they would potentially be highly useful to quantitative researchers seeking to test hypotheses and develop theories in this domain.

In sum on this point, qualitative researchers are highly motivated to strengthen the external validity of their research findings. Doing so makes their research more useful to quantitative researchers. The more useful it is to those individuals, the higher will be the impact relative to publication citations, and ultimately, to the information flow in that research domain. Qualitative researchers who ignore external validity, conversely, will find their conclusions less useful and less impacting to the greater development of knowledge and understanding in that domain. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship.