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Our initial exercise at the commencement of EDUC 151 was to proffer a definition of qualitative research. At the time, I enjoyed the comfortable and naïve conceptualization that qualitative research, as the antithesis to quantitative methods, consisted of the objective collection and interpretation of non-quantitative data. Through the experiences of this course, including luminary readings, class discussions, and methodological practice, my definition has adopted a decidedly Geertzian quality: that qualitative research is the analytic process of generating interpretive accounts of underlying meaning as manifested by the interaction of cultural actors and the ethnographer (Geertz, 1973). Furthermore, I have come to view the products of qualitative research as cultural artifacts themselves. These products are created and interpreted within a particular cultural context, and are evaluated with respect to a specific cultural framework. Furthermore, they are dynamic in consumption and throughout the following stages of construction: revealed interpretations and reactions to manifestations of culture in observed subjects, recordings of these actions as mediated by sensory perception and instrumentation, derivations of meaning in the form of thoughts and notes, interpretations of these derivations in the form of a written product, and finally, an interpretation of the product by the reader. Throughout this process, the researcher is charged with reflexive awareness of subjectivity and a charge to ethical treatment and presentation of the cultural artifact. In the final summation, validity, and even truth, may be achieved if the entirety of this process is revealed to the consumers.

Alan Peshkin reminds us that personal subjectivity mediates all aspects of the qualitative research process, and that only by acknowledging the state of the researcher at all stages, may validity be achieved. In reflexively attending to this consideration during my research of mathematics education at

a Waldorf school, I found that an objective version of myself does not exist. Rather, my entire self, from internal thoughts to external projections, was shaped and given meaning by particular settings and assumptions, which were then reflected in the cultural artifact being created. This commenced with my questions, images, and ideas at the start of the research process, and the resulting decisions of what to observe with regard to my research objectives (Peshkin, 2000). Entering the field with a conceptual lens of collaborative education, I immediately began to view the focus of my study, a Waldorf classroom, in terms of instances and voids of collaboration. In reflection, I realized that I had adopted a mindset of a researcher looking for instances of collaboration as I had defined them, a bias (Johnson, 1997) that prevented me from seeing meaningful collaboration as potentially defined by the subjects of my observation. Further personal reflection revealed that in the interviews, our selection of questions veered more toward what we felt was important (Peshkin, 2000), prompting us to inquire of our subject, Dr. Babinet, regarding her personal history, and her curricular design rather than devoting ourselves to a path of exclusively exploring what was important to her. As such, the process of data collection was subjectively mediated, resulting in a highly personalized dataset. By this I mean that the data, as derived from external events, could not be separated from the research team itself. We were thus joined in the nascent stages of our cultural artifact. This subjective mediation continued through the interpretation of the data and the creation of the product, to the point where Peshkin's claim that "other interpretations, other meanings, and understandings, are imaginable" rings true. The critical recognition, then, is not that our product reveals a totality of Truth, but that it may, assuming full understanding and disclosure of subjectivity, reveal truth as a relationship between our subjects and ourselves.

The nature of a qualitative product is determined not only by the subjective expressions of the

individual researchers, but by their relative adherence to ethical standards throughout the process.

Ethical standards, as assumed by the community of qualitative researchers, and presented by the American Education Research Association (AERA, 2006), shape the nature of the product as a cultural artifact and mediate the evaluation of its worth. Ethical considerations commence with the events that shape the inquiry, including the establishment of subject consent, discussions of confidentiality, and motives for participation. In reflecting on my own experience, I can see that adhering to the process of establishing consent, rules of confidentiality, and agreements with respect to reporting (AERA, 2006) created an opportunity for research at the expense of a more natural experience. To wit, although it is ostensibly appropriate to establish an ethical groundwork for study, this process yields an observational framework that is distinct from what might be observed by natural interactions in the field. This effect of adhering to ethics is yet another ingredient in the cultural artifact, albeit one that strengthens perceptions of validity in the reader. Similarly, ethical adherence to accurately representing the data, and explicitly describing how this is done in the product (AERA, 2006), as we strove to do in our methods section, enhances the value of the artifact.

The validity of an artifact is the most difficult to define, but my experience in both creating and reflecting upon our qualitative research product has shaped my understanding that validity is achieved when the audience is made explicitly aware of the subjectivity of the researchers, and is convinced of their adherence to ethics throughout the stages of the research process. This definition of validity may be applied to any of the classifications presented by Johnson, whether descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, internal, or external (Johnson, 1997). In our qualitative research project, we strove for the first four of these, leaving the task of generalization to the reader and additional research. We strove for descriptive validity by comparing our observational records in a process of triangulation (Johnson,

1997), which revealed numerous instances of slightly differing records of events. These were typically minor, such as misrepresentations of a particular student's name, owing to differences in auditory experience or mistakes in transcription. Either way, descriptive validity was enhanced by these cross-researcher comparisons. Validity of the interview process was similarly bolstered by performing an audio recording. Interpretive validity was approached by, to the best of our ability, querying our subject for her interpretations of observed events and their surrounding context. This was performed even where slightly uncomfortable, such as when we queried Dr. Babinet concerning distracting student outbursts, which could have been viewed as a critique of her classroom management skills. Theoretical and internal validity were addressed by submitting our product to peer review (Johnson, 1997), both internal and external to the research team. The mistake uncovered in this process was a tendency by each of us to overgeneralize, a lesson which helped us reduce our claims from the scope of Waldorf education to the perspectives of a single teacher. Finally, we attempted to achieve validity in terms of product consumption by selecting a style that adhered to our message. Our intended audience being educators considering alternative approaches to mathematics education, we structured our paper as a series of three dominant propositions addressing the levels of abstraction that are most relevant to shaping pedagogy: institutional, interpersonal, and personal. In this way, we hoped to provide educators with a three-tiered perspective into the approach to mathematics education we witnessed in the Waldorf school, a perspective that would meet their expectations of validity.

Ultimately, a reader of a qualitative research product wishes to know of its truth. As outlined above, truth can only be determined by assessing the product as a cultural artifact, one with roots in the culture underlying the observed events, with coherent branches extending to the point of intersection with the consumer. As Geertz reminds us, the meaning of the artifact does not exist in isolation, but is

generated by the interaction between the reader and the product itself. A true product is one that makes visible the derivations and interactions that lead to its final form, provides the reader with assurances of ethical adherence to procedures, and gives insight into the subjective qualities that shaped the collection and interpretation of data. Such a product provides the reader with a visible pathway which they can trace back to the observed events, and even the underlying meaning itself, where truth resides.

References

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