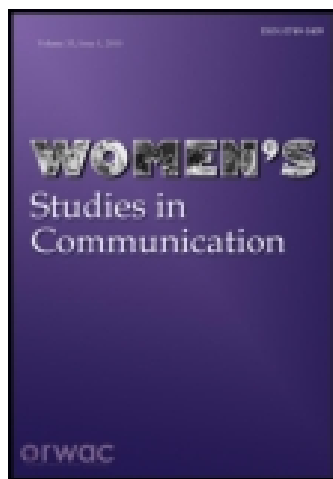


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A Feminist Response to Issues of Validity in Research

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A Feminist Response to Issues of Validity in Research

Elise J. Dallimore

Feminist research has been attacked by critics who claim that it is weak on issues of validity. Feminist researchers can effectively respond to these criticisms by reconceptualizing issues of validity as they relate to feminist goals and research methodologies. Various issues of validity can be addressed through reconceptualization in terms of "trustworthiness" and by demonstrating the "applicability" of research findings. Through such reconceptualizations, feminist researchers can position their work as rigorous, adopt an action orientation, achieve emancipation and social change for women, and, in doing so, effectively respond to their critics.

Both feminist scholars and those who critique their work would likely acknowledge the marginalized status of feminist research in the academy (Ginsberg & Lennox, 1996; Kolodny, 1996; Ward & Grant, 1991). Foss and Foss contend that "a major dilemma facing feminist researchers is how to challenge and simultaneously gain visibility and legitimation for the feminist perspective in the publications of our discipline, which may be unsupportive or unaware of it" (1988, p. 10). More extreme challenges may involve the harassment of feminist faculty and students by male academics. Strine sees such harassers acting out "deep-seated masculine fantasies of aggression and domination normally sublimated in their academic work as dispassionate, tough-minded 'objectivity' and methodological rigour," while simultaneously intimidating "their victims whose feminine sensibilities and supposedly softer, more experimental and participatory approaches to knowledge are feared as contaminant to the rationalistic, male-centered, academic workplace" (1992, p. 399).

What might be characterized as a strong resistance or even open hostility to feminist research by some members of our discipline is evident in the responses Blair, Brown, and Baxter (1994) received after submitting a feminist critique of colleagues' work in an attempt "to enter into the ongoing conversation about speech communication scholarship as gendered" (p. 387). Blair et al. (1994, p. 398) concluded from their reviewers'

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responses that “appropriately ‘professional’ scholars should be: (1) politically neutral, (2) respectful to science, (3) mainstream, and (4) politically deferential,” each of which is inconsistent with feminist theory and the goals of feminist research.

In this essay, I discuss the ways in which feminist researchers can respond to critics who claim that, like other types of interpretive and critical scholarship, feminist research is weak on issues of validity—central markers of credible and legitimate research in the traditional social sciences. This response addresses issues of validity in research design (i.e., issues of internal and external validity) and in measurement (i.e., content validity). I begin by examining the nature of the relationship between feminist research and traditional standards of “objectivity,” illustrating the need to evaluate feminist research either by a different set of standards or to reconceptualize some of these research standards. In responding to issues of validity, I put forth collaborative research practices as one means to demonstrate the internal and content validity of feminist research findings. Further, by reconceptualizing external validity in terms of “specificity” and “accountability,” feminist researchers can demonstrate the “applicability” of their findings and can achieve the feminist goal of emancipation through social action. I believe that feminist research can respond to these issues in ways that meet the standards of rigorous research while not compromising the goal of studying “women’s subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it” (Self, 1988, p. 2).

I maintain that feminist research should be defined by both its goals and its methodology. Reinharz (1992, p. 240) suggests feminist research is guided by feminist theory which “aims to create social change” and “strives to represent human diversity.” According to Shields and Dervin (1993, p. 67), feminist research is research for women and must be emancipatory, with “emancipation” being defined as “the end of social and economic conditions that are oppressive to women.” This definition is used by Acker, Barry, and Esseveld (1991) who draw from the goals of the sociology of women (Hartsock, 1979; Westkott, 1979) when defining feminist research. I would broaden this definition to include the wide range of people conducting research on women and whose goal is to improve women’s status through emancipation and social action.

In addition to being defined by shared goals, feminist research is also defined by a feminist methodology which provides a theory of how research should be conducted and how theory should be applied (Harding, 1987; Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991). This feminist methodology provides a

broader theory of how to do feminist research. According to Jayaratne and Stewart, it views methods as “simply specific research procedures” (1991, p. 92). This view supports a recognition of a “multiplicity” of appropriate methods for feminist researchers and contends that actual methods matter less than whether or not the research is guided by feminist theory and/or a feminist perspective. I argue that feminist research can be accomplished through the use of a variety of research methods; however, preferably, methods used will allow researchers to capture the experiences of participants using participants’ own voices. One way in which this can be accomplished is through collaborative research which frequently “includes the researcher as a person” in the research and/or “attempts to develop special relationships with the people being studied” through interactive strategies (Reinharz, 1992, p. 240).

Both the goal of emancipation through social action and the commitment to collaboration are problematic when considered in relation to the standard of “objectivity” sought by traditional social scientific researchers. Acker et al. (1991, p. 139-140) explain that, “The ideal of objectivity is to remove the particular point of view of the observer from the research process so that the results will not be biased by the researcher’s subjectivity.” Harding (1991, p. 157) suggests that many feminists see this “notion of objectivity” as “hopelessly tainted.” Smith (1974, p. 9) described this standard of objectivity as a “set of procedures which serve to constitute the body of knowledge of the discipline as something which is separated from its practitioners.” Smith (1974, 1977) later critiques this standard—which she claims unnecessarily separates the knower from what s/he knows and more specifically separates what is known from any interests or “biases” not authorized by the discipline—when she asserts, “I must emphasize that being interested in knowing something doesn’t invalidate what is known” (1974, p. 9).

Various feminist researchers have directly challenged this norm of objectivity that “assumes that the subject and object of research can be separated from one another through a methodological screen” (Westkott, p. 425; see also Acker et al., 1991; Harding, 1991; Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991; Smith, 1974, 1977; Westkott, 1979). Researchers have examined “subjective” elements in supposedly “objective” research agendas in an effort to reveal what Jayaratne and Stewart (1991) have called the “illusion of objectivity” which they associate particularly with the positivist approach and to which they offer three primary critiques (see Bleier, 1984; Jayaratne, 1983; Lykes & Stewart, 1986; Stanley & Wise, 1983; Wallston, 1981).

First, they argue that because "objective science" is sexist in both purposes and effects, it is not in fact objective. Second, objectivity has imposed what they call a "hierarchical and controlling relationship" on the researcher and the researched. Third, by idealizing objectivity, subjectively-based knowledge has left such knowledge outside of "science" (Jayaratne and Stewart, p. 98).

These critiques have emerged, in part, because this "norm of objectivity" is inconsistent with feminist goals and methodology. As Rose (1982, p. 368) asserts, feminist methodology attempts to "bring together subjective and objective ways of knowing the world" rather than excluding one and privileging the other. Harding (1987, p. 9), whose view of objectivity, like others', can be summarized as an issue of distance and control, suggests that as feminist researchers, we need to avoid the "objectivist" stance because it "attempts to make the researcher's cultural beliefs and practices invisible while simultaneously skewering the research object's beliefs and practices to the display board." Harding also claims that by introducing a "subjective" element and acknowledging that the "beliefs and behaviors of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of research," "objectivism" can be reduced.

Not all researchers would agree that reducing "objectivism" in this way is desirable or even possible. This feminist approach to objectivity, as well as feminist approaches to internal and external validity (i.e., generalizability) represent ways in which feminist research departs from the research conducted by traditional social scientists. Certainly, feminist researchers have not been singled out as the sole violators of the traditional standards of objectivity, or of issues of validity relating to both research design and measurement. Both interpretive and critical research are criticized on these same grounds (e.g., Bostrom & Donohew, 1992). For example, Nagel (1994) suggests that all "scientists" are basically engaged in a similar enterprise, one which is "frequently value-oriented" but in which objectivity is possible and, ultimately, desirable. What he fails to consider is that even if one accepts that objectivity is possible in the social sciences (which I do not), who is to say that such an aim would be considered valuable by interpretive or by critical researchers? What Nagel and other critics seem to want to ignore is that both interpretive and critical researchers are pursuing different ends from those pursued by traditional social scientists.

In spite of feminists' critiques of objectivity, Jayaratne and Stewart (1991, p. 98) assert that "most contemporary feminists reject any notion that objectivity should be renounced as a goal altogether." Just as feminist

researchers discuss the role of objectivity in their research, I argue that issues of validity as they relate to feminist research need to be reconsidered (and perhaps reconceptualized) as well. Research that is designed to explain and enhance understanding of phenomena or that seeks emancipation and change is different (both paradigmatically and methodologically) from research designed to predict and control (Presnell, 1994). These differences, however, are often overlooked by critics. Presnell (1994, pp. 15-16), for example, describes ways in which critics of interpretive research have faulted "the result of qualitative research according to the goals of positivist science, without considering if it is being employed in the context of an interpretive paradigm." Similarly, many critiques of feminist research fail to reflect an adequate understanding of feminist goals and assumptions, particularly ignoring the commitment of feminist researchers to social change and emancipation for women. This does not mean that critics of feminist research must themselves be feminists or must necessarily adopt a feminist perspective in order to wage a critique; however, it does suggest that critics should demonstrate a thorough understanding of feminist goals before deciding upon the criteria by which to evaluate worthwhile feminist research.

Deetz (1973, p. 14) suggests that interpretive studies are as "valid" and "rigorous" as quantitative research "if judged with appropriate criteria and if separated from simple impressionistic insights." Similarly, I would argue that feminist scholarship can be valid and rigorous as well. However, before criteria for evaluating feminist research can be determined, feminist goals must be clearly understood. Efforts should be made to separate well-founded critiques (e.g., a critique based on concerns regarding the credibility of particular research findings) from those which reflect a general "unwillingness and inability to recognize the legitimacy of scholarly analysis undertaken from a feminist perspective" (Ginsberg & Lennox, 1996, p. 190).

As LeCompte and Goetz (1982, p. 31) explain, "the value of scientific research is partially dependent on the ability of individual researchers to demonstrate the credibility of their findings." They further note a common criticism directed at qualitative investigation: failure to adhere to various research "canons" including internal and external validity. Borg and Gall (1989) similarly document the criticism of qualitative research methods (and research which uses such methods) for being "weak" on both external and internal validity. Although feminist researchers may use a variety of research methods, they frequently choose qualitative methods to capture

participant's perspectives and experiences (and to do so in participants' own voices). It should be noted, however, that critics may attempt to discredit feminist research by claiming it fails to meet traditional standards of validity and objectivity when, in reality, these critics may simply be uncomfortable with the goals of feminism generally and feminist researchers more particularly. This effort to discredit feminist scholarship is part of a larger system of "antifeminist" practice which Ginsberg and Lennox (1996, p. 172) see manifest in an "outright refusal to grant the validity of feminist topics and approaches."

Issues of Validity

Frey, Botan, Friedman, and Kreps (1991, p. 118) suggest that internal validity asks "whether a research study is designed and conducted so that it leads to accurate findings" about the phenomenon being studied. Ultimately, Frey et al. suggest that "if a study is valid internally, the conclusions drawn are accurate" (p. 118). Internal validity refers to issues of validity in research design (as does external validity). Measurement validity refers to the ability of a particular measurement technique or research method to capture the "actual meaning" of the concept under investigation. Content validity is one of three means of ensuring a measurement technique is valid. Frey et al. (1991, p. 122) explain that a "measurement technique possesses content validity if it reflects the attributes (or content) of the concept being investigated," and a common way to establish content validity is to determine that a measure seems accurate on the "face of it" (explaining why this technique is called face validity).

Various scholars have specifically addressed validity issues in interpretive and qualitative research, discussing both the validity of measurement and of research design and, in doing so, have defined validity generally in terms of the "accuracy of scientific findings" (Deetz, 1973; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stewart, 1994). In further breaking down validity issues, LeCompte and Goetz (1982, p. 32) define internal validity as the "extent to which scientific observations and measurements are authentic representation of some reality" and external validity as "the degree to which representations may be compared legitimately across groups. Using these definitions, Stewart (1994, p. 46) describes validity as "a measurement of the accuracy of certain representations." This requires a determination of the extent to which conclusions effectively represent

“empirical reality” and an assessment of whether constructs generated by researchers represent or measure “the categories of human experience” that occur. From this view, validity claims are about the correspondence between conclusion and constructs, assuming that “research findings can be tested by assessing how well they correspond with, represent, reflect or are applicable to an objective reality” (p. 49).

Deetz (1973, p. 152) similarly explains that “validity in the normative paradigm is based on prior agreement as to whether a concept or instrument has a reference to its claimed ‘real’ world referent.” He suggests, however, that “the more fundamental experiential validity of interpretive-understanding . . . is established during contact with the world rather than prior to or separate from it” (p. 152). This view of validity is consistent with Stewart’s (1994, p. 48) interpretive approach that “holds that validity assessments are situationally and communicatively accomplished.” For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) view validity as “trustworthiness” which assumes that interpretive inquiry operates as an open system and that the strategies (e.g., member checking, triangulation, persistent observation, auditing, etc.) put forth for achieving trustworthiness may be persuasive but not absolute. This view questions a validity standard that wants to promise with surety the accuracy of research findings. Instead value is placed upon the trustworthiness of particular interpretations, and trustworthiness is established when conclusions are drawn from a variety of data sources using a variety of research strategies. I contend that this view is importantly different from more traditional views of validity.

Stewart’s (1994) view of validity as “trustworthiness” is consistent with Gadamer and Taylor’s complementary approaches to validity. Stewart explicates Taylor’s arguments regarding why natural science theory should not be the model for social theory. These include: first, the need to attend to “common-sense understanding,” which social theory attempts to challenge, replace, or extend; second, insistence that social theory cannot employ a correspondence model because social theory is partially constituted by self-understanding, and, unlike natural science theory, is not about “independent objects”; and third, the belief that social theories are validated by being tested in practice, for example, by applying a theory to actual practice and seeing how (or if) the practice changes when informed by the theory. From this approach, “validity is thus not established by determining how well a finding ‘fits objective reality’ but by employing the finding and assessing how effectively it ‘enables practice to become less

stumbling and more clairvoyant' " (Stewart, 1994, p. 57). From this perspective, validity involves gaining confidence in research findings by making sure that they make sense in practice. Validity then is demonstrated by showing that theories and research findings "work in the world," and more specifically, feminist research demonstrates its validity by demonstrating how it works in the world by creating social change for women.

Similarly, Stewart (1994) explains that, according to Gadamer,

One does not establish valid interpretations or findings by being a technical virtuoso of method. Instead, if one observes how validating actually occurs, one can recognize that it emerges when thinkers (1) encounter "something that asserts itself as truth," (2) apply it to its relevant practices, and (3) assess what it "comes to in being worked out." (p. 59)

In arriving at this view of validity, Gadamer argues that validity is a process of questioning and inquiry (i.e., hermeneutics) which guarantees "truth." However, he contends that this truth is not acquired by following a particular methodology, thus providing an opening for the use of multiple methods. This is consistent with feminist research practice which, while guided by feminist theory, draws from a variety of research methods.

Ultimately, Stewart (1994, p. 61) argues that Gadamer's approach to validity "shows that correspondence methods of developing confidence in knowledge claims constitute only a very narrow route to validity." This approach suggests the importance of selecting the most appropriate methods enabling a researcher to get at the "truth" and subsequently establishing its validity by testing it in practice. Both Gadamer and Taylor critique the view of validity as correspondence (in favor of validity as practice) and, in doing so, open space for interpreting validity as "trustworthiness." Stewart (1994, p. 76) raised the concern that "perhaps unfortunately, Taylor, Gadamer, and those who translate accounts like theirs into treatments of validity as 'trustworthiness' do not provide a validity recipe—a comprehensive list of research strategies and tactics for guaranteeing the strongest possible argument." Although feminist researchers also cannot provide a "validity recipe," they can effectively achieve validity in research by incorporating research practices that can ultimately lead to the "trustworthiness" described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Stewart (1994). In achieving this "trustworthiness," feminist researchers are effectively responding to critics who assume that researchers who do

not meet the traditional standards of validity are engaged in “sloppy research” which consists of “merely subjective observations” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 289).

A Feminist Response to Issues of Validity

Acker et al. (1991, p. 145) suggest that validity in feminist research should be evaluated by “the adequacy of interpretation.” Their criteria for “adequacy” first suggest that “the active voice of the participants should be heard in the account” (p. 145). Second, they insist that an interpretation must take account of both the investigator and the investigated. Further, they suggest that research demands “that we try to understand reality from the perspective of the people experiencing it” (p. 146). Acker et al. respond to issues of validity in their own feminist research by pushing for a collaborative model of research. In justifying their decisions, they state, “We assumed that our study participants would have a better chance of telling us about their worlds as they saw them if their active participation in defining dialogue were encouraged” (p. 146).

Use of collaboration can enhance both the internal and content validity of feminist research. Collaboration with participants (when research is designed and conducted) would lend more credibility to research findings, arguably providing increased accuracy or “trustworthiness” of one’s results. Additionally, collaboration can be utilized to help establish measurement validity by speaking to issues of content validity (e.g., by allowing participants to help assess the “face validity” of a particular technique). For example, a participant can assess whether an interview captures (i.e., measures) her experiences and does so in her own words. Though only one of many, collaboration is a concrete method by which feminist researchers can demonstrate the validity of both measurement tools and research findings.

Oakley (1981) calls for a collaborative relationship between the researcher and the researched on moral and methodological grounds. She claims that collaboration is “a different role, that could be termed no intimacy without reciprocity” (p. 49). Shields and Dervin (1993, p. 67) suggest that such “reciprocal sharing of knowledge and experience between the researcher and the researched” results in a situation in which “the dichotomous relationship between the researcher and the object of study is replaced by a dialectical one where those researched become collaborators in the research project.” It should be noted, however, that the

way in which collaboration is conceptualized varies among researchers and can vary in the level and degree of participant involvement. For example, some feminists recommend developing "rapport," others suggest the blurring of the role between participant and researcher, and still others call for a more radical elimination of the distinction between researcher and researched altogether (Reinharz, 1992). For example, Glesne and Peshkin (1992, p. 11) suggest that the forms and extent of the collaboration may vary, and, in some cases, participants might be involved in every aspect of the research enterprise, "including establishing research priorities, collecting data, interpreting data, and taking action toward solving an identified problem."

Collaboration in its variety of forms has been embraced because "feminist scholars have rendered the researcher-researched relationship particularly problematic" and have reconstructed relationships with research subjects to enhance dialogue (Kauffman, 1992, p. 187). In her own research, Kauffman refers to both the researcher and the researched as "subjects who are both producers of meaning and accounts" (p. 188). In justifying this move, she notes that:

In so using "subjects," I call for recognition that the active meaning of the term applies to the researched as well as to researchers and contest the notion that "subject" necessarily connotes subjection and domination when applied to the researched, even as it is assumed to connote subjectivity and agency when applied to researchers (and authors, artists, etc.). (p. 188)

Collaboration should be recognized as more than a mere research technique. For feminist scholars, it is both a research practice and, perhaps more fundamentally, a particular orientation toward research. Such an orientation is designed to address power differences between the researcher and the researched; through collaborative research practices, feminist researchers can begin to address these power differences. Collaborative research is used by feminist researchers to avoid objectifying the women they study (i.e., to resist the subject-object split) and to provide a means for demonstrating the reasonableness of one's interpretations by determining that findings reflect participants' lived experiences. By incorporating a collaborative approach in their work, feminist scholars can generate the "adequacy of interpretation" (Acker et al., 1991) that provides feminists

with a means of obtaining validity (i.e., “trustworthiness”) in their research.

In building on the work of Acker et al. (1991), Wylie (1994) puts forth a “collectivist model” for feminist research, largely based on collaboration. This model “focuses on the experience of women as research subjects and takes the requirement of fidelity to this experience to mean that women should be asked rather than told what they are experiencing and why” (p. 613). The importance of collaboration is evident because the collectivist model is committed to taking women’s experiences seriously and to acknowledging that women “have a credible theoretical, explanatory grasp of what goes on in their own lives” (p. 613). The model stresses collaboration in ways that respect women’s interpretations of their own lives, but it also allows a researcher to address issues of validity (i.e., “trustworthiness”) by committing “to take their subjects’ experience seriously as a point of departure, not as immune to challenge and criticism” (p. 615).

I have argued that collaboration—between the researcher and the researched—is an effective means for feminist researchers to demonstrate the validity of their findings and interpretations as well as the validity of the methods by which those findings are obtained. Although conceptualizations of validity vary, both feminist researchers and traditional social scientists share a common commitment to be “rigorous” about their findings and to be able to adjudicate between conflicting interpretations. Feminist researchers can legitimately argue that validity be rearticulated in terms of “trustworthiness” because, in feminist research, validity cannot be measured or treated in traditional ways. However, I suggest that collaboration, both between the researcher and the researched and between a feminist researcher and her/his colleagues, can help establish the “trustworthiness” of research. Various feminist researchers have discussed the benefits of such collaboration (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Ward & Grant, 1991). Ward and Grant (1991, p. 249) cite considerable research supporting the notion that “collaboration may improve the quality of research by making it more inclusive, more complete.” And I would add, more “trustworthy.”

It should be noted again that collaboration is one feminist research agenda (but not the only one). There are others. In fact, some ideas can be drawn from more general interpretive and critical scholars. For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue for “trustworthiness” as the appropriate criteria for internal validity (as well as the criteria for external validity and

objectivity) and describe methods by which such “trustworthiness” can be demonstrated. They suggest using member checks (a technique similar to collaboration as detailed above) as a means of establishing the credibility and accuracy of research findings. Additionally, they endorse the use of other tools, including “persistent observation,” triangulation, and negative case analysis to establish the internal validity of interpretive research studies. I agree that these various tools might provide feminist researchers with additional means for addressing issues of internal validity in their research.

Another possible means by which feminist researchers could demonstrate the validity of their findings is through using those findings to achieve their goals of emancipating and creating change for women. The argument for using practice as a measure of validity (as conceptualized in terms of “trustworthiness”) was put forth by Taylor, Gadamer, and Stewart. This approach is consistent with the goals of action researchers who attempt to use research findings as a means by which to address a concrete problem. Action research is applied research: the goal is to solve a problem by using research to determine a solution and then testing the solution through action (Susman, 1983). One might argue that a particular measurement technique possesses content validity or a research finding possesses internal validity if they are able to solve a concrete problem. Therefore, the analogous test for feminist researchers might be whether or not their research methods and findings contribute toward the emancipation of women in a concrete way. The issue of validity for feminist researchers then might be more a question of whether research works in the world, and studies would be judged based on their impact on social change.

External Validity

Frey et al. (1991, p. 118) suggest that external validity concerns the “generalizability of the findings;” questions of external validity ask whether or not conclusions can be applied to people and contexts outside of a particular study or the extent to which the findings of an experiment can be applied to particular people and settings (Borg & Gall, 1989). More precisely, external validity entails issues of both population validity—“the extent to which the results of an experiment can be generalized from the specific sample that was studied to a larger group of subjects” (p. 649) and ecological validity—“the extent to which the results of an experience can

be generalized from the set of environmental conditions created by the researcher to other environmental conditions" (p. 650).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), "external validity" is another aspect of trustworthiness in research. Their definition of external validity (i.e., generalizability) as "the extent to which the findings of a particular inquiry have applicability in other contexts or with other subjects" (p. 290) is consistent with the definitions obtained from research texts. Generalizability is a central marker of traditional social scientific research; however, the role of generalization in research (and criticism of some types of generalizing claims) has been the subject of considerable discussion. Bostrom and Donohew (1992) suggest that "the serious need for attention to the process of generalization continues," (p. 114) and that "while it is true that the pursuit of generality has been one of the worst features of positivism . . . the flaws in the positivist search for generality should not be an argument for replacing positivism with a system [the system of interpretivism] in which general statements are even less likely" (p. 124). While they admit that problems with generalization are not confined to interpretive research, they claim that generalizability may be more problematic in interpretivism because of what they see as an "obvious logical problem" of "generalizing beyond a single observation" (p. 114).

The view presented by Bostrom and Donohew (1992) might lead one to believe that interpretive research is limited to ideographic findings. However, views of generalizability are varied. Miller (1983, p. 34-35) seems to discount generalizability claims when he suggests that "research snapshots that capture only a relational moment—the cross-sectional, ahistorical generalizations associated with most prior communication research—are, at best, oversimplified and, at worse, scientifically counter-productive." In contrast, Bostrom and Donohew (1992) argue that generalizability is an essential aspect of research, but an aspect which interpretive researchers are unable to address adequately. I believe that feminist researchers can develop viable options for responding to generalizability issues but must begin with a reconceptualization of generalizability as articulated by various interpretive and critical researchers.

Reconceptualizing Generalizability

Feminist researchers can respond to generalizability issues by challenging traditional views of generalizability and reconceptualizing what the practice might entail for interpretive and critical researchers. Fitch (1994, p. 37) argues that interpretive research can and should generalize findings

and suggests that "findings from one study should be translatable to other studies, theories and problems. Exploring the particularities of one setting need not (and should not) imply reducing the findings to reports of idiosyncrasy." She uses Smith and Eisenberg's (1987) study as an example of how interpretive research can "document a communication process that happens elsewhere" (p. 37). She suggests that Philipsen's description of "talking like a man in Teamsterville" was actually a description of "talking like a man" elsewhere because Philipsen "provided a grounding for that study within the larger questions of how cultural premises about identity shape communication behavior" (p. 37). These examples suggest that interpretive research is generalizable; however, interpretivists do not generalize in the same way that traditional social scientists do.

Putnam (1983) argues that although generalizability is possible in interpretive research, it is different from the types of generalizations possible through "functionalism." She explains that interpretive research is aimed at "in-depth understanding and explanation of a particular phenomenon." Further, Putnam states that "functionalists . . . develop universal laws that can explain and predict external reality. They operate from the perspective of an objective outsider who deduces generalizable principles" (p. 45). In contrast, she claims that "interpretivists also generalize their findings but only within the realm of the features unique to their research" (p. 46).

In other words, she is arguing for a type of generalizability which allows for the in-depth study of a particular phenomenon through an inductive process, one which allows "categories and hunches" to be refined and later compared and contrasted with those of like phenomena. For Putnam, however, these categories are only uncovered through the in-depth study of each phenomenon (or participant) because she sees interpretive research providing "a relativistic view of the social world," one in which relationships emerge inductively from the study of participants' lives (1983, p. 40). For example, study might involve becoming immersed in the daily lives of participants in order to understand their lives and, ultimately, creating what she terms "nonlinear representation of causality" (p. 46). This is a reconceptualized view of causality which allows for further inductive analysis by providing the basis for comparing how the unique experiences of one participant might be similar to or different from the experiences of others.

It should not be assumed that the nature of generalization for interpretive research should mirror the generalizability claimed by "functional-

ists" (i.e., traditional social scientists). Certainly, the "breadth-of-applicability" need not be the primary feature of "worthwhile" research because as Fitch (1994, p. 37) articulates, "depth, not breadth, is the traditional advantage of qualitative (interpretive) approaches." With a primary focus on depth of understanding, I contend that feminist researchers can achieve generalizability as it has been clarified and reconceptualized by Putnam above. Such a position represents a feminist view of generalizability that is both reasonable and ultimately obtainable.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose reconceptualizing generalizability in terms of its "applicability." They do not, however, detail what applicability means other than to discuss briefly the transferability of findings to additional contexts. I would argue that applicability is an appropriate reconceptualization of generalizability for feminist researchers (and for others engaged in either interpretive or critical research); however, I would more specifically suggest two means by which feminist researchers can demonstrate the applicability (or generalizability) of their findings. First, they may consider adopting "specificity" as a bounded form of generalizability, or, second, embracing "accountability" as an alternative to traditional standards of generalizability.

Generalizability in feminist research, as in other forms of interpretive and critical research, may involve applying findings to other people and contexts. The value of generalizability in these cases, however, should not be judged according to traditional views of generalizability (i.e., the desire to universalize claims across all people and all contexts in order to accomplish the goal of prediction and control). Rather than the over-generalized "universalism" that much of traditional social science ascribes to, a reconceptualization of generalizability as a form of applicability can be accomplished for feminist researchers through "specificity" or "accountability," both of which explore viable means for reconceptualizing traditional boundaries and standards of generalizability.

Specificity as "Bounded" Generalizability

The commitment to preserving individual differences among women is a fundamental characteristic of feminist research. The traditional views of generalizability have been problematic for feminist researchers precisely because the act of generalizing involves erasing differences in order to construct universal theories and claims. Phelan (1994, p. 12) asserts that we should not simply focus on whether people are similar or different within "a particular structure" but rather focus on how they are similar and

different and what the implications of that are. Foss and Foss (1994, p. 41) insist that research should be designed to provide "for a multiplicity of truths and a valuing of diversity." They further claim that by seeing people in the world as distinct individuals, it is more difficult to "essentialize, categorize and dismiss difference among participants." For Ferguson (1993, p. 81) the move toward essentialism involves overgeneralizing or universalizing in ways which assume that "the experiences women have and the meaning of their experiences are determined by this underlying essence of womanness." She cautions against the universalizing move which "takes the patterns visible in one's own time and place to be accurate for all" (p. 82). This is especially problematic for feminists because as Phelan (1994, p. 5) suggests, "the effort to construct a singular 'woman' will inevitably leave out the lives of those who do not have the hegemonic power of description."

For many feminist researchers, generalizability is to be avoided entirely because of the danger of making essentializing claims about women (Ferguson, 1993; Phelan, 1994). Perhaps there is concern that attempts to demonstrate population validity will lead to essentialist practice. But if all generalization is problematic, how then is emancipation of women to be effectively accomplished (especially in light of these differences)? I would argue that "specificity" as explored by Phelan (1994) provides a reconceptualization of traditional standards of generalizability. In essence, she advocates a form of "bounded" generalizability, providing a valuable framework that does not merely acknowledge the similarities and differences among women but uses them to create the foundation for political action.

For Phelan (1994, p. 90), "specificity" involves focusing on the specifics of similarities and differences as a first step in a process that ultimately allows for the bridging of individual differences for the sake of political action: "The virtue of specificity as a methodological imperative is the ability to demarcate various overlapping sites of struggle in a social space." Phelan further claims that "specificity" or getting specific is a prerequisite for a politics which "is neither vanguardist nor blandly pluralist, that recognizes differences as important and enduring and difficult and works not to erase or eliminate those differences but to weave the threads that might link us" (p. 40). She says that getting specific is a process of "weaving threads" because, while it is possible to separate the various aspects of our identity (one thread might say class, one gender, one race, one sexuality, and so on), this process of separation is not enough and

“will never do justice to the way that the whole fabric is lived” (p. 32). She compares getting specific more to storytelling than to analysis, although suggests both are required.

According to Phelan (1994, p. 70), moving from “difference,” which she sees too often lending itself to unbridgeable gaps, toward specificity of location (or what she calls “identity points”) “allows us to acknowledge inequalities of power and position while through that very acknowledgment discovering and articulating the linkages between us.” This is one of the valuable contributions of Phelan’s approach because as she explains, “identitarian politics” assumes that common action must be based on identity among partners; however, “getting specific” moves identity politics away from “identitarian formulations,” toward what she calls “alliances.”

For Phelan (1994), those “alliances” make social change possible through what she calls “coalition politics.” Coalition politics is based upon community, and she suggests that community “does not preexist its members, but consists in ‘the singular acts by which it is drawn out and communicated’” (p. 81). In essence, community is created as common activities are enacted; community is socially constructed as alliances bring people together in action. She further suggests that:

coalition cannot be simply the strategic alignment of diverse groups over a single issue, nor can coalition mean finding the real unity behind our apparently diverse struggles. Our politics can be informed by affinity rather than identity, not simply because we are not all alike, but because we each embody multiple, often conflicting identities and locations. (p. 140)

Phelan (1994) makes a unique contribution toward accomplishing emancipation and social change because she looks beyond traditional views of generalizability and instead embraces specificity. She treats individual difference in a way that does not essentialize women’s experience but instead allows for “coalitions” through which emancipation can be accomplished. Getting specific allows for political action by bridging individual differences. Either by reconceptualizing generalizability in terms of specificity or endorsing “specificity” as a form of bounded generalizability, feminist researchers can make their research applicable, respond to the issue of generalizability, and, in doing so, remain true to feminist goals and practices.

In its bounded form, generalizability refers to people who share points of connection and who construct community through their shared political action. Specificity offers a bounded form of generalizability by which feminist researchers who come to understand the specific experiences of participants' lives can then begin to relate their findings to others outside their immediate study who share similar "identity points" and who may be willing to come together to create a community through action and social change for women. I would argue that this very practice responds to issues of both population and ecological validity. It is this move toward getting specific, this "weaving together," that provides the basis for a bounded generalizability. Being bounded does not mean identifying a smaller population but rather a population with overlapping similarities. Further, specificity provides a process for social change consistent with feminist goals (while addressing concerns of essentialism) that ultimately allows researchers to make themselves accountable to their research participants.

Accountability as an Alternative Standard

"Specificity" and "accountability" should be viewed as complementary, both providing means by which feminist researchers can demonstrate the applicability (and thus the generalizability) of their research findings. However, specificity provides a "bounded" form of generalizability, while accountability provides an alternative to traditional standards. I contend that "accountability" is not only intimately connected to generalizability for interpretive, critical, and feminist researchers, but can be viewed as an alternative to traditional standards of generalizability. Accountability speaks to issues of generalizability because if researchers are to be accountable, they must be able to share the interpretation of findings with participants. Moreover, they must attempt to apply or utilize these findings in potentially liberating ways for both those being studied as well as the broader community. This move to apply findings, to be accountable to research participants, is in essence a matter of generalizability.

By emphasizing accountability as an alternative to more traditional standards of generalizability, feminist researchers can respond to generalizability concerns in a way that is consistent with feminist goals and practice. The process of accountability requires researchers to consider how their research might be of "any practical value to the subjects" (Hawes, 1994, p. 5). There must be attempts to "give back" to the people who are studied and to make the research relevant to and valuable for them. Tompkins (1994, p. 49) suggests that one of the criticisms of academic research is that "subjects often have trouble finding themselves in the statistics of social

scientific research.” Similarly, interpretive and critical researchers need to be careful not to generate data which becomes so removed during the research process that the final product is not useful (and in some cases not even recognizable) to the subjects of the study. One might reasonably argue that “accountability” is one way to avoid this problem and to allow for a different type of generalizability, one consistent with the goals and assumptions of feminist research because it entails applying research findings beyond the scope of original research participants.

Miller (1983, p. 37) suggests that “the fact remains that questions about social utility and significance have been at best shortchanged and at worst ignored.” This is something that Scheidel (1994, p. 68) claims “demands much more attention from all researchers in the field,” because as Tompkins (1994, p. 49) explains, “how people in the world react to our research is not an unimportant concern.” In addition, Hikins (1995) raises concern over “real life” problems which researchers need to address. Taking into account the implications of one’s research for the people being studied and for the community more broadly, as suggested by Miller (1983), Scheidel (1994), Tompkins (1994), and Hikins (1995), is a generalizing move. A move toward greater accountability is a move closer toward demonstrating one aspect of generalizability, including demonstrating the applicability of one’s research findings.

Certainly, concern for the ways in which our research affects “real people in the world” is consistent with the more explicit call by feminist researchers who encourage the adoption of an action orientation in academic research allowing for emancipation and social change. I would argue that no one is making a stronger call for accountability (and applicability for that matter) in research than feminist researchers who claim that research must be conducted for the purpose of improving women’s lives (Ferguson, 1993; Foss & Foss, 1994; Phelan, 1994). Foss and Foss (1994, p. 42) assert that research “is done to empower women—to assist them in developing strategies to make sense of and make choices about the world in which they live.” Various feminist researchers argue that feminist research must be emancipatory (Acker et al., 1991; Shields & Dervin, 1993; Hartsock, 1979; Westkott, 1979).

It is clear that accountability is relevant not only to interpretivists but also for feminist scholars. Further, an implication of addressing issues of accountability in feminist research is recognizing the inherently political nature of the research process. Allen (1993, p. 205) raises the question of whether scientists should function as “mere spectators to social events” or as moral forces. Comstock (1994, p. 630) argues that positive, as well as

interpretive, social sciences “attempt to deny the political aspects of knowledge, separate the role of the social scientist qua scientist from her or his role as a political actor.” In contrast, critical scholars (the group to which I would argue feminist scholars belong) as “participants in the sociohistorical development of human actions and understanding, . . . must decide the interests they will serve” (p. 630). From a critical perspective, research is inherently political, and researchers cannot separate the scientist into “a nonpolitical, value-free observer and theorizer on the one hand, and a political person who expresses values and interests on the other” (p. 630). Feminist researchers see their role as inherently political because pursuing emancipation and social change is most certainly a political enterprise.

Issues relating to the impact of research on “real people”—and the political nature of research—serve to raise concerns about accountability in research. The move to include accountability as an alternative to traditional standards of generalizability presents a means by which feminist researchers can demonstrate the applicability of their research generally and specifically address the ecological validity of their findings. According to Frey et al. (1991, p. 135), ecological validity “refers to the need to conduct research so that it reflects, or does justice to real-life circumstances.” By being accountable to those studied—by making research applicable to “real people” through real action in the real world—ecological validity can be demonstrated.

Feminist researchers who explore the impact of their research on real people are, in essence, demonstrating the external validity of their findings by attempting to bridge individual differences in ways that allow for social change and emancipation. Asking feminist researchers to demonstrate the “accountability” of their research requires them to consider the ways in which this research is transferable or generalizable. Lincoln and Guba (1985) see applicability as an appropriate reconceptualization of generalizability for interpretive research. Similarly, feminist researchers who adopt “specificity” and/or “accountability” are able to demonstrate the applicability of their research findings and, in doing so, effectively respond to issues of external validity in their research.

Conclusion

This essay explicates the ways in which feminist research can effectively respond to various issues of validity while maintaining the integrity of feminist research and preserving the goals of emancipation and social

change. I argue that the use of collaboration is one means by which feminist researchers might demonstrate the “trustworthiness” of their research. Further, feminist researchers can respond to issues of external validity by reconceptualizing generalizability in ways that are consistent with the goals of interpretive and critical scholarship (e.g., in terms of the applicability of research findings), and more specifically by embracing “specificity” as “bounded” generalizability and/or pursuing “accountability” as an alternative to traditional standards of generalizability.

By documenting the ways in which feminist research can address various aspects of the validity question, feminist researchers can begin to confront their critics on these issues because, as Ginsberg and Lennox (1996, p. 190) suggest, there needs to be a collective effort to combat “unfair standards and criteria applied to feminist work.” Feminist researchers are not likely to conduct research which is politically neutral, respectful to science, mainstream or politically deferent (Blair et al., 1994). However, they can effectively defend the credibility and applicability of their findings through their treatment of internal, content, and external validity issues. These responses can be made in ways which serve to legitimize feminist research and continue “making the invisible visible, bringing the margin to the center, rendering the trivial important, putting the spotlight on women as competent actors, and understanding women as subjects in their own right rather than objects for men” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 248).

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Notes

¹I recognize that traditional social scientific research is no more monolithic than is feminist research. Both have been categorized in various ways, using a variety of terms. Social scientific research sharing the positivist (i.e., "conventional") paradigm and using what Lincoln and Guba (1989) refer to as "the methodology of conventional inquiry" (involving quantitative methods and nomothetic interpretation) has been referred to as functionalism, empiricism, objectivism, positivism, etc. These terms have frequently been used as covering terms to refer to the range of scientific approaches that share these assumptions about the acquisition of knowledge through research. Burrell and Morgan (1979) use the term "functionalism"; O'Keefe (1975) and Bostrom and Donohew (1992) use the term "logical empiricism" to refer to "conventional science"; Allen (1993) uses the term "traditional science"; Taylor (1994) uses the term "mainstream social science." Jayaratne and Stewart (1991) refer to "positivism" and quantitative methods (p. 88). Putnam (1983) refers to the term "functionalist" as "a generic or generalized paradigm based on positivist orientation to research" resembling what she terms both "normative schools of thought" and "objectivist traditions" (p. 34). She cites Burrell and Morgan's (1979) use of the term "to encompass such diverse theories as structural-functionalism, social systems, conflict functionalism, behaviorism, social exchange models, and abstract empiricism" (p. 34), but she also uses the term "positivism" interchangeably. I do recognize that there are differences among these various research traditions (and even in the way each term is used by different authors); however, they do share some basic paradigmatic, ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. For the purposes of this essay, I have grouped these terms together based upon their common research tradition and refer to this broader category as "traditional social science" because of shared roots.

²Research conducted within the critical tradition attempts to identify and describe systems of domination, critique these systems, and offer ideas for change or reform (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). Operating from this definition of critical research, I locate feminist research within the critical tradition. Researchers differentiate interpretive and critical research paradigms in a variety of ways. Putnam (1983) describes interpretive research in terms of a broad perspective which she contrasts with functionalism. Within this perspective, she identifies critical research as one subset and naturalistic research as the other. Burrell and Morgan (1979) incorporate interpretive and critical research into a four paradigm schema in which they show the two sharing a subjective notion of reality (as contrast with an objectivist stance) but differing in terms of their views on regulation vs. radical change. They align the interpretive perspective with order and their critical

stances with conflict and change. Both share certain assumptions about the socially constructed nature of the world (and the role of objectivity and subjectivity in research) thus explaining why researchers from both traditions adopt similar methodological approaches. Both traditions rely heavily on the use of qualitative research methods as contrasted with the quantitative methods reflective of the functionalist (i.e., social scientific) tradition. It is these ontological and methodological similarities that I use to justify addressing these research traditions together in places to advance my argument. However, because of their differing goals (in terms of regulation v. change), I separate them at what I see as their points of departure.

³For purposes of clarification, the term "interpretive research" typically refers to research conducted from an interpretive paradigm while "qualitative research" refers to research conducted using qualitative methods. These two types of research are not synonymous; one is used to represent a methodological distinction the other used to represent a paradigmatic distinction. However, there are frequent instances in which researchers use these terms interchangeably to capture one or both of these distinctions. Although I recognize that these terms are not synonymous, it should be noted that researchers frequently treat them as such, a point raised by Presnell (1994). However, Presnell's use of the term interpretive research (and later Deetz's use of the term interpretive studies) refers to research conducted from an interpretive paradigm which employs the use of qualitative research methods.

⁴Stewart begins by identifying the various types of validity and then the concern all discussions of validity share—how to evaluate research (i.e., to decide between research that should be taken seriously and research that should not). He addresses validity issues collectively by focusing upon the subject-object distinction which he identifies as the philosophical issue behind the basic validity problem.

⁵It should be noted that this is not *Verstehen* because it is dialogic.

⁶I recognize that inclusivity does not inherently translate into dialogue. However, I would argue that collaboration increases the likelihood that dialogue will occur between the researcher and the researched. I am also operating from the perspective that knowledge is socially constructed through such dialogue. In order to avoid confusion, it should be noted that when I am referring to dialogue in this essay, I am adopting Bakhtin's (1981) view of dialogue as articulated in *The Dialogic Imagination*.

⁷One example of action research is "practitioner research" used by educators as a means of professional development and a form of educational inquiry. One function of this type of research is to help classroom teachers assess and improve their teaching effectiveness. Jacobson (1998, p. 125) defines practitioner research (as borrowed from Elliot) as "a study of a social situation with a view of improving the quality of action within it." He argues that the value of practitioner research is not tied to its rigor but rather to its usefulness. Further, he uses the construct of "integrity" (similar to the treatment of validity, in this manuscript, as "trustworthiness") as the basis for measuring internal validity.

⁸This is in contrast with types of basic research that may generalize findings to a broader range of people and contexts but do not attempt to actively use research findings to improve the lives of those to whom research findings have been generalized. Again, I contrast this type of research with research which takes an action orientation or is applied in focus.