

## Rethinking Qualitative Research: Research Participants as Central Researchers and Enacting Ethical Practices as Habitus

*Rowhea Elmesky*

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**Abstract:** This article suggests that qualitative research group dynamics shape university researchers' capacities for expertly enacting ethical practices. Specifically, I assert that when research participants become the researchers, both university-based and community-based members of the research group have opportunities to deeply experience each other's life worlds. By spending time together as researchers, we can then develop ethical expertise that is fluid, unconscious, and implicitly appropriate for the community in which the research is being conducted.

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### 1. Introduction

In their article, "'No thank you, not today': Supporting Ethical and Professional Relationships in Large Qualitative Studies," BLODGETT, BOYER and TURK discuss the importance of developing positive and ethical relationships between researchers and research participants while conducting large qualitative studies; the authors also share the specific practices by which they actualized such ethical ideology. For example, their article stresses dignity, respect, and compassion as being central to conducting ethical studies, and they share methods by which they obtained "free and informed consent" throughout the entire research process. Additionally the authors acknowledge and address issues of power with vulnerable populations and discuss ways for easing the tensions of insider/outsider researcher positions. [1]

In responding to this article, my goal is to build on some of the central ethical elements highlighted by BLODGETT and her colleagues by suggesting additional methods through which qualitative researchers can maximally achieve high

ethical standards. I do so both theoretically and by sharing some of my experiences working with marginalized high school students as researchers during a three year NSF-funded, critical ethnographic study of teaching and learning science in urban schools located in Philadelphia inner city neighborhoods. [2]

I propose that a key approach to the development of ethical and professional relationships during qualitative studies, particularly with marginalized populations, is through the expansion of research teams to intimately involve research "participants" as actual researchers who operate within multiple and rich roles. When research structures are altered to expand the definition of researcher to include teachers, students, parents or other community members, multiple opportunities unfold for all of those involved, and ethical "know-how" becomes embodied and unconscious rather than the conscious adherence to an abstract set of rules (VARELA, 1992). [3]

## **2. Blurring Boundaries: Inside Out and Outside In**

Although, as university researchers, we may make sincere efforts to be respectful, caring and forthcoming during a qualitative research process, inclusive research structures can assist in blurring the power differentials that tend to remain between researchers and research participants. Without the contradictory dynamic of researcher and researched, when *both* groups become *the researchers*, those who are typically marginalized and silenced have new opportunities to exert their power to act or agency (SEWELL, 1992), both collectively and individually, in ways that further the research process and potentially transform other parts of their lifeworlds. Additionally, the relationships that ensue within newly structured research groups enable both university-based and community-based researchers to gain more of the "sense of the game" (BOURDIEU, 1990) for each other; that is, researchers can unconsciously develop ethical practices by being together and working toward common research goals. Thus, as research structures shift to intimately include members of marginalized populations, university researchers will have opportunities to more naturally embody practices communicating authentic understandings of respect and kindness as expressed within that particular community. In this manner, ethical expertise may become part of one's habitus or repertoire of unconscious dispositions (BOURDIEU, 1990), and researchers who may have previously been considered outsiders to marginalized communities (e.g., university-based researchers from dominating racial, cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds) may be more readily welcomed and included, thus easing the tensions between insider and outsider positions. [4]

### **3. New Research Group Dynamics**

As indicated by BLODGETT, BOYER and TURK, embracing an ethical ideology in conducting qualitative research is crucial, especially when the research questions to be answered involve marginalized groups of people who may be perceived as inferior to the dominant population. Even when researchers make conscious efforts to be fair, honest and compassionate, and to situate decision making within the hands of research participants, disparities still overtly (and subtly) remain. Although we may attempt to complement research agendas with compassion towards research participants, in doing so we continue to communicate hierarchies of power since, in being compassionate to another group, there is an assumption that one group is aware of the other's challenges and possesses some ability to alleviate them. To build ethical expertise, we must be more than consciously compassionate; we must become necessarily unified with the community in which we are conducting research, and construct research groups that include the individuals whom would be traditionally considered research participants, as fully involved researchers. That is, students, teachers, and school administrators can work as researchers who engage in multiple roles, including data collection, artifact production, and the analysis and interpretation stages. [5]

Within typical qualitative research structures, the university researcher may seek to include the participants' voices, yet only within consent or member checking capacities; they are rarely included in the processes of research question selection or data collection, production and analysis. Consequently, university-based researchers may lack opportunities to develop authentic "insider" perspectives of the marginalized communities in which the research is situated, and struggle to develop an instinctive sense of ethical know-how in interacting with the research participants. Crossing gateways and accessing insider positions remains motivated by meeting research agendas and authenticity criteria, rather than by the intention of becoming one with the community—a full participant whose practices as a researcher are fluid and synchronous with the practices of that particular population. [6]

### **4. Developing Ethical Expertise**

As put forth by VARELA (1992), an ethical expert can be conceived as someone who fully participates within a community, such that ethical know-how becomes unconscious and as fluid as other dispositional ways of being that we already embody, such as movement or language patterns. Ethical practices then potentially change when working with different groups of people, and within different fields that are characterized by culture or systems of symbols holding specific meaning(s) and associated practices (SEWELL, 1999). As university-based researchers work with different communities, it is important to have chances to participate fully with them as well as for them to participate fully as part of the research group. As we work "at the elbow of another" (ROTH & TOBIN, 2002), we have the opportunity to grow and learn in ways that were not previously possible. We have the chance to develop an innate sense of the game

for those practices that are favorable and communicate respect in ways that are understood by the particular community. Entrainment in one another and solidarity (COLLINS, 2004) arises through fluid interactions that are not marked by the breakdown or misunderstanding of practice; thus, research goals can be more authentically discussed, negotiated or collectively developed. [7]

In the following section, I specifically share the ways in which students can work as researchers, the ways in which their involvement alters the research process and the unconscious development of ethical know-how that emerges within both university and student researchers. [8]

## **5. Students as Researchers: Learning about Respect**

Multiple studies over the last seven years have gradually involved high school students as more and more central to educational research processes, by employing them as researchers (e.g., ELMESKY & TOBIN 2005; LAVAN & BEERS, 2005; OLITSKY, 2005). Although the methods by which the students have been engaged as researchers differ, the driving goals have been student involvement, empowerment and voice. Student researchers are representatives of their communities and schools, and their involvement mobilizes new sets of resources for the research process and allows access to and opportunities for understanding the various schema and rule systems shaping their practices. Therefore, working with student researchers changes the data resources that are accessible, the ways in which data is interpreted, the findings that are emphasized as important and the methods by which the findings are reported (ELMESKY & TOBIN, 2005). For example, student researchers may decide what research activities are useful, often proactively changing the direction to address more salient issues. Most significant to this discussion, however, is that through the new research relationships, student and university researchers develop novel ways of interacting and being such that ethical know-how becomes unconsciously embodied and part of one's habitus. [9]

Early on, during the first summer of our work together, I lacked expertise in understanding both the lives of the student researchers outside of our research group and the appropriate manners of communicating respect. This became evident in the breakdown of my practices in interacting with Shakeem when he arrived one morning to the university research office and put his head down on the table to listen to his CD of music. Inexperienced in my interactions, and lacking ethical know-how, I tried to acquire his attention, reaching out my hand towards him; I wanted him to talk to me. He perceived my gesture as disrespectful and intrusive of his space, warning me clearly, "Don't touch me." I later came to understand that being "all up in [his] grill" was not a respectful practice for Shakeem and many of his peers. If I waited and he felt comfortable with speaking to me, he might approach. Although I felt compelled to assist Shakeem, my attempts to be understanding and sympathetic failed. [10]

Although this was not the first or the last instance in which I experienced breakdowns in my efforts to be ethical, with time I began to interact differently.

Almost three years later, one summer morning, Shakeem walked in very early to work with clothes soiled and a haggard face. He shared with me that he had never made it home from west to north Philly the night before, and to make matters worse, got "rolled on" by some boys on the subway that morning. Having spent time with Shakeem as a researcher over a long period, I instinctively knew that he did not want to be seen by the other student researchers in a disheveled state. Conversations, both formal and informal, with Shakeem over the years regarding his experiences in school and with his grandmother provided me with knowledge of the socioeconomic challenges he and his family faced, and I had witnessed the ridicule he often received from peers. Without asking, I also knew that he was hungry and would not have eaten since the day before. Although we had a research meeting planned and tasks to accomplish, I immediately suggested to Shakeem that he take a quick visit to his grandmother, who lived close to the university and had served as a caretaker for him in the recent past, so he could feel more comfortable and refreshed at work that day. I gave him extra bus tokens to ride there and back, and informed him that there was no need to deduct the time lost from his timesheet. When he returned, he had showered, changed and eaten; he joined the other student researchers with dignity, and maintained his respect within our group. [11]

In working with Shakeem and other student researchers, I have learned that respect holds multiple meanings within various fields, may be communicated, earned or lost in different ways, and manifests through different practices depending upon the depth of the relationship. That is, sometimes, respect as exchanged between peers may involve engaging in verbal "playin" (ELMESKY, 2005), dance or rap performances, or staging confrontational spars (ELMESKY 2003). In other instances, respect emerges through deeply rooted feelings of loyalty, a willingness to sacrifice what may be needed for oneself, for a family member or close associate; this is often described as "havin another's back" (SEILER & ELMESKY, in press). Certainly, when a university researcher attempts to communicate respectfully, it is important to hold a deeply seated understanding of what is valued by the student researcher—this can arise through altering research group dynamics to be inclusive of students and expansive in their roles. [12]

## **6. Researchers Becoming like the Other**

ROTH and TOBIN (e.g., 2005) have documented extensive micro level evidence regarding how individuals become like one another as they unconsciously acquire similar practices, language patterns, and other dispositional mannerisms. While ROTH and TOBIN write about coteaching situations and study the shifts in new teachers' practices, "becoming like the other" as an interactive phenomenon emerges through spending time in spaces with others and can be extended to research settings. It follows that as we become more like each other, abstract knowledge of the "right way" for acting gives way to fluid ethical enactment. [13]

## 6.1 Scholarly exposure

In our initial work studying the teaching and learning of science, student researchers in our Philadelphia team were involved in teacher education capacities as well as in data collection and artifact production through interviewing and ethnographer roles in their schools. As time passed, however, it became evident that the student researchers needed to be provided with access to common language and practices that would help them to share their viewpoints and interpretations in ways that would be well-received by those in academia. Consequently, the student researchers were exposed to sociocultural theoretical perspectives through readings, discussions, and other resources that could communicate both conceptual notions and introduce language. In doing so, they cultivated new sets of resources, tools for thinking about the events occurring within their life worlds, and learned how to study various data sources and select and interpret salient vignettes through the respective theoretical lenses. For example, upon introducing BOURDIEU's (1986) concept of capital, the students gradually became more familiar with multiple forms, including cultural, social and symbolic capital, and the ways in which capital is built, lost or exchanged. With common language, we were able to discuss data in interesting and new ways. Whereas, I identified certain video vignettes as evidence of the building or loss of social capital, the student researchers often identified and emphasized different vignettes. [14]

One of the most interesting transitions from everyday talk to more focused theoretical discussions occurred in relation the group's viewing of their chemistry classroom video footage. They located a clip (less than ten seconds in duration) of a student hitting another student with a rolled up piece of posterboard that was being utilized for a science classroom project. While a student researcher initially focused upon the vignette—simply viewing it as humorous, several weeks later, following exposure to theoretical lenses, one of the student researchers independently revisited the vignette. Instead for humor, it was selected as an example of how students lose and gain symbolic capital (the interpretation put forth asserted that the student being hit was losing status with his fellow classmates since he was being assaulted and not fighting back; the student who threw the strike was building his reputation in front of peers). [15]

The student researchers also learned to engage in micro videoanalysis techniques for identifying patterns, as well as the associated contradictions, in the video footage from their classrooms and other settings. During the second summer, for example, Randy created a "movie" featuring patterned video vignettes of his science teacher's successful teaching practices. He also included contradictions to the teaching practices, which he entitled, "What happens when Carambo [the teacher] turns his back." The fresh perspectives that were captured by student researchers like Randy helped the research group to understand more authentically what works and doesn't work in urban science classrooms. Moreover, the student researchers became increasingly involved in research seminar presentations in which they disclosed data findings or artifacts and

fielded questions skillfully; they also occasionally attended conference presentations. [16]

## 6.2 "You had to get to know us"

As summed up by one student researcher, in the above quote, as time went on, it became increasingly obvious that just as the student researchers had become scholarly participants in the university arena, I needed to become part of the students' communities. During the summer research sessions, the formal research time was consciously divided so as to spend time in spaces valued by the students and university-based researchers. We engaged in collective activities, with my university colleagues, including playing basketball, visiting museums, and watching movies. Sometimes a researcher would visit my home, or I would drop them by their house. I began to develop a sense of the game for how to interact with the students in manners that were aligned with their ways of being. That is, by being with the student researchers, in different spaces both inside and outside of school and within the university setting, I became more skilled in interpreting and participating in their language and interaction patterns as well as in recognizing and valuing their likes, dislikes and goals. In addition, I became better able to interpret nonverbal body language or facial expressions, knowing for example, on some days, that it felt "right" to turn off the audio or video recorder to just *be* together. Furthermore, I caught on to common slang phrases as well as cultural symbols and practice that would allow me to better fit in with their peers. I learned words like "jawn," memorized popular rap lyrics, and became more authentic in my reactions to and initiations of verbal "playin." [17]

The student researchers noticed the changes in me; this was evident in comments by Shakeem such as, "everytime I see you Roskino [Rowhea], you more gangsta to me." Even in my interactions with other students in the same school that the student researchers attended, I was more fluid in my ability to interact appropriately. For example, once during class, a student made a side comment about a rapper. When I quickly rattled off one of the rapper's popular lyrics, the student's jaw dropped in surprise. By working with the student researchers, I had developed critical skills for gaining acceptance and respect. [18]

## 7. Coda

Conducting qualitative research within communities where individuals have different social and cultural histories from one's own is dangerous, especially in an unjust world. Sharing similar ethnic roots, skin color or wealth accumulation does not presume embodied knowledge of a particular group of people living within a particular space. Cultural symbols and practices evoke different meanings for different individuals, even within similar contexts. As society positions university researchers with status and attributes authenticity to our research, the perspectives of those who are "researched" or involved as participants in studies are easily silenced despite the most sincere efforts for ethical practice. By the very nature of our lack of knowledge of various community practices, norms, rule systems and all of the associated contradictions, we lack

ethical expertise in surface-level interactions and may unintentionally communicate disrespect or unkindness. Yet, even deeper ethical errors occur when we reduce social complexities to patterns that we can most easily see (even when peering through specific theoretical frameworks and methodologically attempting to meet highly rigorous authenticity criteria) due to a research design that stunts our potential for building oneness with the community in which the research is situated. [19]

Without adjusting the structures shaping the ways in which qualitative research is conducted, through the mobilization of new sets of human and material resources and by inviting the debate of ideologies underlying current research approaches, we will continue to limit the potential of qualitative research. Since research dynamics also shape the ways in which research participants exert or express their sense of agency in the world, shifts in research group membership provides opportunity for individuals to act in forms other than declining to be part of a study. New opportunities lead way to new forms of agency. [20]

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## Author

Rowhea **ELMESKY** is an assistant professor at Washington University in St. Louis. Her main contributions to the science education field have been developing macro, meso, and micro level understandings regarding the ways in which resources and schema from social fields outside of the classroom shape what occurs within and the identification of students' cultural capital. Her recent publications include a co-edited book, *Improving Urban Science Education: New roles for teachers, students and researchers* (with KENNETH TOBIN and GAIL SEILER, 2005).

Contact:

Rowhea Elmesky

Assistant Professor

Faculty of Arts and Sciences

Washington University in St. Louis, McMillan

Hall, Box 1183, One Brookings Drive, St.

Louis, MO 63130

USA

Phone: 314-935-6269

E-mail: [relmesky@wustl.edu](mailto:relmesky@wustl.edu)

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