

## After the Aftermath

*Kara M. Strobel*

A Reply to Wolff-Michael Roth's Review of Harry F. Wolcott's "Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath" published in *FQS* 5(1)

**Key words:**

ethnography,  
research ethics,  
fieldwork, intimacy,  
discretion, power

**Abstract:** This article is written in response to Wolff-Michael ROTH's review of Harry F. WOLCOTT's *Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath*, which offers an account of events initiated by an earlier work by WOLCOTT—"Adequate Schools and Inadequate Education; The Life History of a Sneaky Kid." Originally designed to examine the distinctions between schooling and education, the study later became a catalyst for discussion on every aspect of qualitative research. This article examines some of the reviews of the book, focusing on three key ethical issues (power, intimacy, and discretion), followed by a closer look at ROTH's review in particular. Finally, a brief alternative review is presented.

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## 1. Introduction

I am pleased to offer this response to Wolff-Michael ROTH's (2004a) review of Harry F. WOLCOTT's *Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath* and my own alternative musings on WOLCOTT's work. In recent submissions, Wolff-Michael ROTH (2004a, 2004b, 2005) has criticized WOLCOTT for his actions involving a study he conducted in 1981. ROTH's allegations sharply criticize WOLCOTT on both a personal and professional level. [1]

I have read his review of WOLCOTT's earlier book entitled " 'If Somebody's with Something Every Day They've Gotta Learn Something—Or They're Just Out to Lunch': The Dialectics of Ethnography as a Way of Being" (ROTH 2003) and various other writings by him, and I freely concede that I admire his inventive, often autobiographical, approach to writing. However, on the issue of his most recent review of WOLCOTT's work, I feel compelled to contest ROTH's position. [2]

My initial opinion of WOLCOTT was formed entirely by a reading of his original article, "Adequate Schools and Inadequate Education; The Life History of a Sneaky Kid" followed by ROTH's "Qualitative Research and Ethics" (2004b) as the pieces were presented in a qualitative research course in which I was enrolled. Naturally, I assumed that ROTH's portrayal of events was accurate and initially agreed with his critical assessment. Out of curiosity, however, I searched for WOLCOTT on the Internet and discovered that he is still a professor with emeritus status at the University of Oregon. I was surprised at this. How could a reputable institution retain such a disreputable character in its employ? Intrigued, I decided to investigate. The following exploration is the result. [3]

## 2. The Documents

### 2.1 The original study

In the spring of 1983, WOLCOTT published "Adequate Schools and Inadequate Education: The Life History of a Sneaky Kid" in *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*. The study recounted the history of a young man who, after failing repeatedly in the academic and familial areas of his life, had squatted on WOLCOTT's twenty acre property on the edge of Eugene, Oregon. He stayed for two years, leaving when he was twenty one. Availing himself of a serendipitous series of events, WOLCOTT undertook to conduct in-depth interviews with Brad, aimed at identifying factors involved in the success or failure of individuals who negotiate their way through the public school system. The study's conclusions proposed a differentiation among learning, education, and schooling. It concludes that schools, while adequate in most senses, are ill-equipped to provide any more than the basics of schooling for special-needs youth, and that a social system needs to be created to deal with the broader social and emotional issues that affect adolescents and children. [4]

Initially, the study was commissioned for inclusion in a governmental report addressing educational adequacy, which ultimately received little attention. When

WOLCOTT became editor of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* in the spring of 1983, he introduced himself to the readership by publishing the article in his first edition. To this day, it "remains a well-referenced source among qualitative researchers and graduate students in the field" (DENTITH, 2003, p.1324). [5]

## **2.2 The Brad trilogy**

Subsequent events drastically broadened the import of this research. Two and a half years after Brad's departure from WOLCOTT's property, he returned with a vengeance, seriously beating WOLCOTT and burning down his home. The ensuing trial revealed a sexual relationship between WOLCOTT and Brad which occurred throughout several months of the second year of Brad's residence there. Understandably, this revelation rocked the qualitative research community and spawned heated debate among academics. From its original standing as an ethnographic exploration of the adequacy of schools, the study's focus exploded into a complicated, controversial discussion of ethics and intimacy in fieldwork. The complete tale is chronicled in three articles, including the original study, which together are referred to as "The Brad Trilogy." They were published by WOLCOTT in *Transforming Qualitative Data* in 1994. [6]

## **2.3 Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath**

In 2002, WOLCOTT published a complete account of the events in *Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath*. This text makes no attempt to disguise the fact that this is the tale told from WOLCOTT's perspective, yet it is an honest, sometimes raw, portrayal of what happened and how it impacted WOLCOTT's personal and professional life. In the words of John SINGLETON, who wrote the book's introduction, "more questions are answered than many of us would consider decent to ask" (WOLCOTT, 2002, p.vii). Indeed, that is certainly one overwhelming feeling the reader gains from this story: Once we have indulged our voyeuristic desire to know all the intimate details, we must then confront the undeniable truth that WOLCOTT's personal and professional life was unduly scrutinized and battered by a community keen to expose a scandal, but unable to cope with all that it learned. [7]

## **3. A Review of the Reviews**

The original article and its ensuing events have been the topic of discussion in several academic papers. These papers position themselves along a clear spectrum which polarizes two distinct schools of thought. Most engage in an exploratory exercise, arriving at conclusions that are empathetic toward WOLCOTT and his role as researcher and intimate. Others, notably ROTH, condemn WOLCOTT for his personal and professional conduct. [8]

Discussions that land on the side of WOLCOTT evaluate a number of factors, focusing primarily on intimacy in field work, the importance of discretion, power relationships, and a general commentary on the subject of ethics in research. Significantly, discussions that condemn WOLCOTT explore similar topics yet

arrive at entirely different conclusions. The following is a short discussion of each issue. [9]

### 3.1 Intimacy in fieldwork

All reviewers agree that there is a need to establish rapport through some degree of intimacy for qualitative research to be successful (BUSIER et al., 1997; FINE, 1993; SIMONS, 1996; DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2003). In fact, most agree that this element is part of what lends qualitative research its effectiveness and power, that "the complexity and power of intimate human relationships, generally, and in research, specifically" (BUSIER et al., 1997, p.165) plays an inevitable role in qualitative methodology. It enhances the researcher's ability to note, interpret, and articulate his observations in the field, as "reason works better when emotions are present; the person sees sharper and more accurately when his emotions are engaged" (MAY, as cited in SIMONS, 1996, p.11). [10]

Debate occurs, however, over the degree of intimacy that is appropriate in a study, and over the impact that intimacy has on the study's findings. The resultant discussions expose the lack of consensus on exactly what role intimacy should hold in the qualitative field. Again, this discussion has been generously fuelled by WOLCOTT's personal interaction with his subject, Brad. BUSIER, et al. (1997) recognize that the study has made a significant contribution "to a more thoughtful and thorough examination of the meaning of intimate relationships as they illuminate the deeper meanings in our connections to each other, to study participants, and to our research" (p.169). The potentially positive impact that intimacy can have on the study's findings is immense. Depending on the nature and purpose of the study, some level of rapport is essential in all qualitative research if the researcher wishes to gain access to subjects or to extract pertinent disclosures from them (CRESWELL, 1998, p.117). While this sentiment may be generally accepted, it logically evolves into a major theme that arises in discussions about WOLCOTT's original study. This theme debates the *degree* to which rapport must be established for a research project. How much is enough? How much is too much? This is an area of rabid controversy. When a researcher identifies a subject for study, how much effort should he expend disarming that subject's wariness or discomfort? WOLCOTT's detractors fixate on the sexual relationship between WOLCOTT and Brad, denouncing WOLCOTT for having abused his fiduciary position. An important point to make here, however (and one which will arise repeatedly throughout this article), is that the sexual aspect of the WOLCOTT's relationship was established months before the government's proposal that WOLCOTT write a paper for them (WOLCOTT, 2005, p.246). The personal physical relationship, then, was established before any researcher/subject relationship. While most intimate relationships have power inequities, there is no reason to believe that WOLCOTT exerted undue pressures on Brad to submit to his will. Put simply, this translates the question from "is sexual intimacy acceptable in fieldwork?" to "is fieldwork acceptable in a sexually intimate relationship?" and essentially eliminates much of the argument of WOLCOTT's critics. [11]

Much of the discussion of the element of intimacy between WOLCOTT and Brad is muddled by one extraneous issue that permeates it and a quick comment must be made to dispense with this. Underlying all arguments is the fact that this is an example not only of intimacy, but of *homosexual* intimacy, which immediately evokes a reader's prejudices about the topic of homosexuality. Where such prejudices exist, rational debate is futile, as homophobia overrides reason. It is a discussion, therefore, that has no place in an academic paper. [12]

Is sexual intimacy in fieldwork the norm or the exception? Obviously, there is little data on the topic, as most researchers—appropriately—do not consider the details of their sexual activities to be for public consumption. This lack of confessional writing misleads the public to assume that such interactions do not occur. However, that is not the case; there *are* some recorded examples of cases where such muddying of personal and professional relationships occurred.

"One of the dirty little secrets of ethnography, so secret and so dirty that it is hard to know how much credence to give, is the existence of saucy tales of lurid assignations, couplings, trysts, and other linkages between ethnographers and those they 'observe' " (FINE, 1993, p.283). [13]

In his article, "Ten Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research," FINE discusses the realities of research as compared with the myths often perpetuated by the profession. One such reality is the existence of relationships between researcher and researched. FINE alludes to "spicy whispers about ethnographers—typically, anthropologists in distant and storied realms—who 'go native' " (p.284) and cites a number of examples as evidence of his argument. He acknowledges that some relationships are sanctified by marriage, which "might represent the validated, intense commitment to that scene the ethnographer desires" (p.284), but also recognizes that "just as long-term relationships arise, so do brief encounters—equally passionate, even if limited in time and space" (p.284). He recounts the story of Paul RABINOW (1977), whose

"intimacy with a Berber woman in Morocco is well known ... Rabinow only implies that he agreed to sleep with this woman, never writes that they had intercourse, and explains that this woman was a prostitute provided by his 'real' informant, not an informant herself" (pp.284-285). [14]

He describes the experience of Colin TURNBULL (1986), "whose apparent sexual liaison with a Mbuti woman, sent to him by her father, the tribal chief, is described obliquely and presented to explain how he carved out his social identity" (p.285). He cites Dona DAVIS (1986), who "discusses how [her relationship with a] man fulfilled her 'private needs' and discusses in some depth the reactions from villagers, but their interaction is not data" (FINE, 1993, p.285). Finally, he refers to "... a rare book about a female anthropologist and her relations with a local male" (p.285). Clearly, chastity in ethnography is not always the rule and in fact, intimacy can lead to improved data collection; some researchers argue that "in some research contexts, intimate relationships are appropriate" (BUSIER et al., 1997, p.166). [15]

Whether or not intimacy is appropriate may well be a matter for review boards to determine. ROTH (2005) concludes that

"though there are researchers who defend Harry WOLCOTT and his sexual relationship with a researcher participant [again, the chronology is incorrect], I doubt that a research proposal would pass today if the possibility for such a relationship were to be articulated" (para.17). [16]

That is only one academic's opinion, but before his assertion can be tested, the terms of the question must be defined, eliminating the extraneous details. Stripped of these peripheral particulars, here is the essential question: *Is it acceptable for a researcher to conduct a study of an individual with whom he is sexually intimate?* What follows is an abbreviated exchange that I had (on April, 6th 2005) with Dr. Arthur FRANK, of the University of Calgary, exploring that question.<sup>1</sup>

*Question:* Given the following (fictitious) scenario, would a review board give approval? "I would like to study the academic background of an electrician, ultimately to pinpoint the reasons he chose this trade as an occupation. My husband is an electrician. Would it be considered unethical for me to use him as the subject of my research?"

*Dr. Frank:* There's nothing unethical about interviewing a member of one's family for a research project. The issues are basically the same: consent, anonymity, protection of original data, and so forth. The big difference is "recruitment" which risks being coercive (how can a family member comfortably refuse?), but given that the research interest here is professional, I don't see any apparent problem.

*Question:* What if the relationship is not marital? What if the researcher and the subject are lovers, but not legally bound? All other factors remain the same.

*Dr. Frank:* No difference, in my view. The marriage itself has nothing to do with it. The ethics issues are (a) whether the personal relationship (really the non-research relationship) creates any element in coercion in recruitment or responses to certain questions, and (b) whether the non-research relationship compromises confidentiality in any way (that is, the researcher might invoke what had been learned during the interview for other purposes, in the on-going relationship).

*Question:* How would you have responded if I had told you the relationship (researcher/subject) was between homosexuals?

*Dr. Frank:* Exactly the same. It's not a gender issue, it's about subject protection; the question is how the researcher-respondent relationship could compromise normal protections (such as ability to refuse recruitment). [17]

Again, it is essential to dispense with the misimpression that the sexual relationship was initiated *after* the commencement of the study. The reverse was true, and from FRANK's assessment of a similar situation, it is certainly not a foregone conclusion that all review boards would have found the sexual aspect of the relationship to be problematic. FRANK's concerns were specifically directed

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1 This excerpt of an e-mail discussion is reproduced with permission from Dr. Arthur FRANK.

at issues of consent (which Brad willingly gave), the danger of coercion (of which there was no evidence), and exploitation of information gleaned (again, there was no evidence or opportunity for this). [18]

### **3.2 The importance of discretion**

Whether or not researcher/subject personal interactions should be published along with the study's data is debatable. One stream of thought suggests that, within reason, it should. "When intimacy is part of the story, illuminating the interplay between researcher and researched is essential if we are to understand how the research relationship influences fieldwork and interpretation" (BUSIER et al., 1997, p.167). Another perspective states that "protection of participants' privacy and autonomy is essential in many studies to maintain trust in the research relationship" (FERGUSON, YONGE & MYRICK, 2004, p.11). Yet again, there arises a contentious question. [19]

For the purposes of this discussion, "discretion" is defined as the considered decision to omit details from a study's published report. The nature of these details can vary, ranging from the inane to the momentous. Correspondingly, they might be omitted because they are extraneous to the purpose of the study, or because they are potentially detrimental to the subject being observed. It is the responsibility of the researcher to determine "how much is relevant for public consumption, particularly as it relates to the embarrassing actions of the researcher ... The issue of what and how much to report does not have any 'right' or eternal answers" (FINE, 1993, p.282). The researcher must endeavor to forecast the various consequences of his reporting decisions and to apply such prescient wisdom to his final editing choices. Should he decide to publish a specific personal detail, could it result in a potential for harm to the subject? How does the researcher "achieve a comfortable balance between revealing too much or not enough about [his] intimate relationships in [his] attempts to enable readers to understand [his] work and to share in [his] discovery" (BUSIER et al., 1997, p.167)? It is the pursuit of this balance that creates a dilemma for the researcher, whose "choices are constrained by the conditions of academic work and acceptable textual practices" (FINE, 1993, p.268). [20]

While guidelines are available to aid this decision-making process, they are unhelpfully vague and subject to interpretation. The University of Calgary, for example, provides a policy statement (from November 2000) for ethical conduct for research involving humans in which they provide the following excerpted guiding principles:

- 11.1.a "Deception" involves any research procedure [where there is a]....deliberate withholding of relevant information ...
- 12.1.a "Privacy" involves the right to decide the extent to which personal data that is not already in the public domain may be disseminated.
- 12.1.b "Personal data" includes all information relationship to a physical or mental condition; ... social relationships.
- 12.1.c Privacy must be looked at from the cultural perspective of the subject, not the researcher.

[Footnoted is the statement:]

"Consistent with Tri-Council Policy the threshold for minimal risk is that potential subjects can reasonably be expected to regard the probability and magnitude of possible harms implied by participation in the research to be no greater than those encountered in everyday life." (University of Calgary, November 16, 2000) [21]

Ultimately, this lack of clear definition places the burden of discretion squarely on the researcher, who must assess the potential for harm, then conduct his publishing practices accordingly. Occasionally, that decision could be deemed imprudent, as in a case cited by CRESWELL (1998) in which

"a researcher who studies incarcerated Native Americans in prisons and learned about a potential 'breakout' during one of the interviews. This researcher concluded that it would be a breach of faith with the informant if she reported the matter, and she kept quiet" (p.133). [22]

Once again, the researcher was required to find a balance—in this instance between her obligations to her subjects and her obligations as a conscientious member of a larger society. She chose to preserve her confidential status with her subject rather than reveal a secret (a choice which could potentially have cost lives). [23]

WOLCOTT (2005) tackles the issue of discretion in *The Art of Fieldwork*. To him, the matter can be distilled down to "reporting honestly without feeling an obligation to report everything" (p.233). He, too, understands the tension between the obligation to report truthfully and the moral duty to preserve the dignity of the subject. "Whatever an ethnography is, it is not an exposé, not a license to tell all. I would characterize this as keeping one's account close to the ground, but screening everything through a filter, a filter of respectability" (p.235). This sensitivity to the subject is evidenced by WOLCOTT's editorial decisions when writing the original article; he successfully sought to present the relevant data without endangering Brad's well-being. In doing so, he also "challenges us to strive to find balance between too much disclosure and not enough revelation in the telling of our intimate relationships" (DENTITH, 2003, p.1326). [24]

How this pertains to WOLCOTT's decision to omit any mention of his sexual relationship with Brad is obvious. Such personal information had no bearing on the study's findings and could serve only to jeopardize Brad's well-being and social comfort. WOLCOTT's option really wasn't an option at all. To have



exposed their sexual liaison could have led to Brad's discomfiture, as well as WOLCOTT's, yet would have resulted in no educative benefit. [25]

### 3.3 Power relationships

Perhaps the most controversial question arising from the Brad Trilogy is that of power relationships within fieldwork. This was a criticism raised by ROTH in his critique of WOLCOTT's *Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath* and some viewers of "Finding My Place: The Brad Trilogy" (Johnny SALDAÑA's ethnodrama based on the case, which is included in the text). As well, several other reviewers explore the topic, although their appraisals are more sympathetic. [26]

There is no simple answer to this question, as there is no way to definitively determine exactly where the power lay in the relationship between WOLCOTT and Brad, yet most reviewers seem to have an opinion. ROTH makes his views on the matter excruciatingly clear:

"Although they both used the outcomes of the relationship as resources for further actions, the way they deployed these resources was quite different, because of their vast differences in the capital that they each had brought to the situation. The relationship between Wally<sup>2</sup> and Brad was always asymmetrical, from the initial advances throughout the relationship, when the author paid for interviews, reading through the articles, and the other jobs that Brad was asked or offered to do. WOLCOTT acknowledges the asymmetry between Brad and Wally in descriptions such as, 'I tried to be as fair and consistent with him as I could in our every interaction' " (p.44), and he presented Wally as "lay[ing] down the law" (ROTH, 2004a, para.24). [27]

Clearly, ROTH's position is that WOLCOTT somehow abused his greater power over a vulnerable Brad for his own nefarious gain. While he acknowledges that Brad, too, wielded power, he asserts that WOLCOTT was somehow guiltier of the offence. [28]

Granted, there can be power inequities in the subject/researcher relationship, just as there are in the vast majority of human interrelations. The relationship could be considered fiduciary in nature; however, inherent in this term is also the assumption that the individual with the bulk of the power should safeguard the interests of the less powerful individual. Such is the nature of the researcher and subject in cases where there is an imbalance in power. "Power inequities in all relationships place an onus on the more powerful individual to act in the best interests of the other. The research relationship is no different" (FERGUSON, YONGE & MYRICK, 2004, p.12). [29]

However, whether there was an inequity between WOLCOTT and Brad is subject to debate. BUSIER et al. (1997) comment that "the relationship seemed mutually

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2 As will be discussed later, ROTH differentiated between WOLCOTT the character and WOLCOTT the author by dubbing the character "Wally Haircut."

exploitative" (p.167). It could even be argued that Brad gained more from the relationship, as it enabled him to live largely rent- and responsibility-free. [30]

Given the classical definition of power (that the individual with more resources is the more powerful), it would certainly appear at first glance that WOLCOTT had it all. Yet that, too, is negotiable. Power lies in the hands of the individual who makes the rules, and that power becomes all the more potent if the rules are constantly being changed. Brad had one insurmountable advantage over WOLCOTT: Brad played by no comprehensible set of rules, and what few rules he claimed to have, he altered to suit his current desire or mood. His laws were erratic and self-serving, articulated in statements such as "being honest means that you don't do anything to people that you don't know" (WOLCOTT, 1983, p.11), "I wouldn't steal from anybody that knew me, if they knew that I took something or had any idea that I might have took it" (p.20), "I only steal from people I don't know" (p.20), "I'm not going to steal anything I don't need unless it's just sitting there and I can't help it, it's so easy" (p.13), "I can be trusted, to some people" (p.13), "giving my word depends on how big of a deal it is; if it's pretty small, it would be no big deal" (p.20), and "my morals can drop whenever I want" (p.20). These elastic and self-contradictory rules ensured that Brad was not forced by any set code to behave honorably. Furthermore, Brad's lack of personal integrity made him virtually untouchable. For there to be power exerted over an individual, that individual has to have a vulnerable spot—an area that could be targeted by way of applying a consequence to him. Brad had no such weakness—an invulnerability that he exhibited from an early age (when chastised for his foul language in church-sponsored kindergarten, Brad put soap in his own mouth, proclaiming to the other children "Hey, no big deal having soap in your mouth," [p.22], in an ominously portentous gesture of defiance toward authority). [31]

WOLCOTT, on the other hand, was constrained by the fact that he abided by the rules of society—unlike Brad, he obeyed the law, treated others with due respect, succeeded in academia, and conducted himself according to humanitarian edicts. The bulk of WOLCOTT's actions were actually above reproach. [32]

Furthermore, as must again be mentioned, much of the power argument is grounded in the erroneous presumption that the sexual relationship arose from the researcher/subject relationship, when in fact the opposite was true. The relationship between WOLCOTT and Brad started well before WOLCOTT got the request to conduct the study. [33]

A theory proffered by Johnny SALDAÑA, professor at Arizona State University, suggests that there may be other factors at play in audiences' perception of power in the interactions between WOLCOTT and Brad. He considers the "mindset," "individuals' personal past experience/baggage," and an "unwilling[ness] to face the real issue" (J. SALDAÑA, personal communication, April 1, 2005) to contribute to people's responses. These factors would include, among other things, the reader's personal experiences of power abuse and childhood trauma that were mistakenly associated with the WOLCOTT-Brad relationship. The reader/viewer writes the script, as will be discussed in more

depth later, and in this situation the audience's baggage caused a blatant misinterpretation of WOLCOTT's underlying motivation. However, perhaps the power issue is overemphasized. SALDAÑA deals decisively with the dispute when he advises, "Now, forget about 'power,' will you? ... To me, what happened between Harry and Brad was not about power—it was about love, a caring relationship, a mentorship, and—yes—sometimes mutual sexual satisfaction" (J. SALDAÑA, personal communication, April 1, 2005). This is a sentiment echoed by BOUDREAU (2002), who recognizes the love story that emerges from the complex plot, and describes SALDAÑA's ethnodrama, *Finding My Place: The Brad Trilogy*, as "a love story, a case study, and an ethical dilemma" (p.1). [34]

#### 4. Deconstructing ROTH

The purpose of rhetoric is to persuade or influence others, whether by eloquence, manipulation, or diction. Unlike the positivist approach, qualitative research overtly employs rhetoric in a deliberate, sometimes artistic manner. This is both a strength and a weakness, as it can serve either to enhance the verisimilitude of a study or to deliberately deceive the reader. [35]

In response to *Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath*, Wolff-Michael ROTH published "Autobiography as Scientific Text: A Dialectical Approach to the Role of Experience," (ROTH, 2004a) a review essay of WOLCOTT's book. It is a highly critical review, but it is also an excellent exemplar of reader manipulation through misuse of rhetoric. In it, ROTH takes WOLCOTT to task for a number of perceived misdeeds, depicting WOLCOTT as a selfish egomaniac who exploited the defenceless Brad for his own immoral gain. [36]

ROTH concludes that, "critique always involves judgments, and readers need to keep in mind that '[t]he authority of judgment or critical evaluation is not the final authority for deconstruction,' for '[d]econstruction is also the deconstruction of critique' (DERRIDA, 1995, p.212)" (ROTH, 2004a, para.42). In response to that implied challenge, the following represents an analysis of ROTH's review, with particular attention to inaccuracies, omissions, logic problems, histrionics, and linguistic choices. [37]

##### 4.1 Inaccuracies

In one major way, ROTH promotes a mistruth in his analysis of WOLCOTT's actions. Frequently, he presents the order of events erroneously. Perhaps this is simply a misunderstanding on ROTH's part; regardless, the misconception must be addressed. ROTH insinuates that WOLCOTT and Brad's sexual relationship evolved out of their professional one. He states that "the ethnographer Wally Haircut, had initiated and had a homosexual relationship with Brad, his research participant" (ROTH, 2004a, para.16). In actual fact, "... the personal relationship came first, and the professional relationship—WOLCOTT's case study—came later." (BOUDREAU, 2002, p.4). This is an important distinction, as it totally deflates ROTH's argument on this score. [38]

## 4.2 Omissions

Inaccuracies can take many forms. Omissions, for example, are a form of inaccuracy, just as prevarication is a form of lying. ROTH presents a number of partially-complete representations, taking segments out of context and thereby distorting the larger picture. For example, ROTH quotes Brad as saying that what WOLCOTT did "was a low-down, dirty, disgusting perverted thing to do and that is what I have to live with for the rest of my entire life" (ROTH, 2004a, para.30), supporting ROTH's contention that Brad had been victimized by WOLCOTT. Indeed, Brad did say these things, but in the same speech, he also mentions his love for "Lucy" (a girlfriend fabricated in his imagination), his destiny to become a movie star, and his potential to own a "big house and a swimming pool and a Corvette with my name on the license plate" (WOLCOTT, 2002, p.98). These are the ramblings of a delusional young man eventually diagnosed as schizophrenic, and each statement must be conveyed in context to be fully understood. To omit the context is, again, misleading and inflammatory. [39]

ROTH refers to WOLCOTT's innocence in the matter of being beaten and having his house deliberately destroyed as "delusional," suggesting that WOLCOTT is somehow responsible for the crime committed against him (a tactic no longer permitted for defence lawyers in rape cases). "He could no longer adhere to the delusion of being the innocent victim" (ROTH, 2004a, para.36), he contends. Blaming the victim has long been deemed unacceptable in other criminal cases; why would ROTH imagine it to be acceptable in this one? Brad was found guilty by a court of law, so WOLCOTT was indeed the victim. In fact, the judge described the crime as "enormous," and Brad as "dangerous, even more so on his own statement" (WOLCOTT, 2002, p.99). There is no suggestion by the judge of culpability on WOLCOTT's part. [40]

## 4.3 Faulty logic

Several of ROTH's arguments are insubstantial, if not utterly faulty. Four are discussed briefly here. [41]

Regarding consensual sex, ROTH comments that, "no doubt, Brad was of legal age, but he was also not fit to be accepted in the army" (ROTH, 2004a, para.39) and therefore was also not fit to have sex with WOLCOTT. The reason that Brad was not accepted into the army was because he had not completed his education to grade ten (WOLCOTT, 2002, p.51). Certainly, that was sufficient cause for him to be rejected by the military, but is ROTH suggesting that adults with a grade nine education should be forbidden from having consensual sex? [42]

ROTH also takes exception to the payment rule that WOLCOTT enforced on Brad. The rule was, "work first, then pay" (WOLCOTT, 2002, p.45). ROTH describes WOLCOTT's conditions as follows: "Wally decides when the sneaky kid Brad would be paid and for which actions he would be paid, his 'doing odd jobs,' doing the interview, and, who knows, for the sexual favors as well, implicitly or explicitly" (ROTH, 2004a, para.23). First, ROTH is implying, without an iota of

supporting evidence, that WOLCOTT somehow prostituted Brad by offering him money for sex. From nowhere in any of the primary texts can this idea be extracted without considerable exertion on the part of the reader. Second, ROTH is condemning WOLCOTT for what is a common employer tactic—to pay an employee only after work is complete. Alberta teachers, for example, are paid on a similar schedule, yet their union expresses no objection to the practice. [43]

ROTH notes that

"Brad did not want to go to prison, because he would be sexually victimized. This does not sound like a Brad who particularly likes having a homosexual relation, or, if he did at the moment, used his cultural capital to translate the experience into something that prospectively he viewed as horrible" (ROTH, 2004a, para.31). [44]

Again, ROTH has interpreted the text for his own convenience. What Brad's statement indicates is that he didn't like the idea of being raped—which in turn demonstrates only that he understood the difference between a consensual relationship and a forced one. [45]

Finally, a theme that arises frequently, is the ethical issue of using an intimate as a subject for study. Again, ROTH confuses the chronology of events when he claims that "... an ethnographic project, in which the researcher foresees becoming emotionally or sexually involved with his or her research participants, would not be approved" (ROTH, 2004b, para.1). Whether or not his statement is right is beside the point, as the facts driving it are wrong. WOLCOTT and Brad's relationship had been established long before any professional association began. As noted in the intimacy discussion above, this changes the entire fabric of the question. [46]

#### **4.4 Histrionics and false parallels**

Some of ROTH's most subtly powerful arguments lie in his comparison of WOLCOTT's actions to atrocities committed throughout the history of the social sciences. Perhaps the most dangerous of rhetorical devices, it is fortunate that only a discerning audience would likely read the journal that published ROTH's articles and would easily identify histrionics and false parallels. No educated individual would be deceived by the implied comparison of WOLCOTT that ROTH makes to researchers who "conducted studies unthinkable today ... by giving high-voltage electroshocks ... [having subjects] unknowingly ... exposed to mustard gas and other chemical warfare ..." (ROTH, 2004b, para.4). Such false comparisons are emotional and illogical, and fail to serve any useful purpose. Furthermore, the strategy is easily applied in any direction that suits the writer. For example, a writer might choose to draw parallels between Brad and David Koresh, the Branch Davidian leader who caused the death of dozens of followers in Waco, Texas. After all, Koresh, too, "was unable to get along with his step-father and stepbrother, Roger ... At school, he developed a learning disability ... and was eventually placed into a special class reserved for slower learners" (RIFKIND & HARPER, 1994, p.66), all of which are similar to Brad's history. As

an adult, Koresh "claimed to have had a ninth-grade education" (p.65), as Brad did. To make the comparison complete, Koresh also governed himself and his followers according to "... a series of insane rules and regulations" (p.70). Such parallels, while titillating, are cheap and falsely drawn, and accomplish little but to manipulatively evoke an emotional response from the unwary reader. [47]

#### **4.5 Embedded language**

Embedded throughout the ROTH's writing are images and phrases designed to bias the reader against WOLCOTT. Encoded within the text are phrases aimed towards homosexuality that are derogatory and belittling. He crudely describes the sexual act between gays as "getting thumped in [the] butt" (ROTH, 2004a, para.9), and insinuates that homosexuality is "something many people will find objectionable" (para.28). [48]

At points, ROTH's tone toward WOLCOTT is overtly derisive. He separates, for no credible purpose, the character of WOLCOTT as the "protagonist" in the actual events from the WOLCOTT as author and academic. To differentiate between the two, he re-names the protagonist "Wally Haircut." Such a ploy serves only to reduce the integrity both of ROTH's argument and his academic authority and in the end only confuses the reader with statements like, "the interesting point in my reading is that the character of the play and the character of the earlier story are both characters always different from the living person Harry WOLCOTT who wrote the latter and added the former to make a book" (ROTH, 2004a, para.19). Whatever was "interesting" in ROTH's point is lost in the convolutions of the multiple personalities he creates. [49]

The power of language in qualitative research should be used to enhance the verisimilitude of a study, to close the gap between the audience and the subject; exploiting language to mislead audiences does not achieve this objective. [50]

### **5. The Reader Writes the Story**

ROTH discusses the relationship of the reader with the text, citing RICOEUR (1991) when he argues that "lived experiences shape who we are and who we become; how we read and understand a text is an outcome of a transaction between the text and ourselves" (ROTH, 2004a, para.4). Yet, ROTH himself fails to acknowledge his own lived experiences—or, more specifically, his prejudices—when dealing with this matter. His language choices ("getting thumped in [the] butt"; ROTH, 2004a, para.8), churlish tone ("Wally Haircut"; para.5), and distorted arguments (see above) strongly hint that ROTH is a homophobic. While he admits that "lived experiences shape who we are and who we become; how we read and understand a text is an outcome of a transaction between the text and ourselves" (para.4), he does not bracket his own prejudices before launching into his criticisms. [51]

What is the explanation for the diverse conclusions drawn on the same concepts, inspired by the same chronicle? At one extreme, ROTH sees an abuse of power;

at the other, SALDAÑA sees a love story. Should it be "read as self-glorifying and redemption seeking arising from his relationship with the *Sneaky Kid*" (ROTH, 2004a, para.14) or should it be received as a "poignant memoir" (DENTITH, 2003, p.1325)? The answers are crucial to understanding the complexities of qualitative research. A study isn't published to subsequently become a fixed entity in the world. It is absorbed into an audience who, as individuals, apply their own schema to it. In effect, the writer and the reader co-author the text, as "personal perceptions affect both the way a writer presents information and the way the audience receives it" (BOUDREAU, 2002, p.4). SALDAÑA observes that some audience members

"only saw Wolcott's so-called abuse of power over the young man, [and failed to see that] Brad set fire to Wolcott's house, and even attempted to murder him [or that] Wolcott did a lot to support Brad, emotionally, financially. He got him into counselling, and contacted his mother" (as cited in BOUDREAU, 2002, p.4). [52]

In theory, anyway, ROTH understands this concept, as he admits that "[t]here is no message *in* or *behind* the text not even *between* the lines, but only an unfolding of understanding in the transactions between reader and text" (ROTH, 2004a, para.11) and that "...my reading of *The Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath* is a reading of the book rather than *the* reading of the book" and that "the possibilities for my reading emerged from my life experiences, themselves concrete expressions of the possibilities to enact a life in our culture" (para.12). In practice, however, ROTH does not demonstrate any application of this concept to his own reflections on his reading of *Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath*. [53]

What it all means is that each reader, ROTH included, has to deal with his own biases about relationships before fairly appraising the study. For instance: 1) The relationship, obviously, was homosexual. Does the reader carry any prejudices regarding gays? 2) There was a substantial age gap between them; nevertheless, Brad was of legal age for consensual relationships. Does the reader consider that to be immoral? 3) There was a class difference between them. Does the reader believe people should not cross class barriers? Biases and baggage about these issues can never be completely eradicated from the minds of the audience, which explains the diversity in responses to WOLCOTT's actions. The simple fact is that, to me, WOLCOTT did nothing unethical. The complications only arise when a reader superimposes his preconceptions of what is moral onto the text and arrives at a verdict unique to that reader. [54]

Because of this complex reader/writer interaction, qualitative research can be nebulous in nature. It is one researcher's interpretation of an individual's (or group's) perceptions and behaviors, conditional on that individual's ability to articulate and the researcher's ability to accurately record, subject to the reader's interpretive skills and personal biases, and complicated by underlying motives that may never be made entirely clear. The result? According to SALDAÑA, "we never get the whole story, and we aren't likely to fully understand whatever part of the story we get" (as cited in BOUDREAU, 2002, p.6). [55]

## 6. Another Perspective

Occasionally a piece of writing takes on a meaning far more complex than its original purpose. Writing forged for one purpose assumes an entirely alternate importance. Literary examples of this abound; Anne Frank's diary, for instance, originated simply as the heartfelt musings of an ordinary girl in extraordinary circumstances yet transformed into a universally significant message of precocious wisdom that cast radiance into the shadowed corners of all humanity. [56]

Similarly, "Adequate Schools and Inadequate Education; The Life History of a Sneaky Kid"—and the tumultuous saga that unfolded after its publication—"makes a point that far exceeds its origins" (DENTITH, 2003, p.1325). In the words of WOLCOTT himself, the story now serves two audiences: "it is usually included as a reference in any discussion of the validity issue in qualitative research" and it "serves as a lively opening for instructors who want to talk about, or preach about, ethics in field research" (WOLCOTT, 2002, p.112). It accommodates discussion in virtually all areas of qualitative research, ranging from methodology to ethics. Yet it also provokes discussion on topics as far-ranging as the human experience itself, a single source which addresses "the inadequacies in schooling for many of our youth, the continued stigmatization and suspicions about homosexuality, and the complex dilemmas of ethics in educational research" (DENTITH, 2003, p.1325). As the entire story unfolds, it tells "a stunning tale of revision: revised theory is interwoven with increasing revelation about the nature of any meanings assigned to the Brad/Harry connection" (BUSIER et al., 1997, p.168). [57]

Such is the multi-faceted nature of qualitative research, and therein lies its advantage over other forms of social science research. WOLCOTT's "Adequate Schools and Inadequate Education; The Life History of a Sneaky Kid" and the subsequent documents provide an excellent vehicle for exploring this vast range of discussions that can be spawned by a single qualitative research study. In this exploration, however, readers must keep one critical point in mind: the purpose of each of these writings is vastly different, and therefore any critique of them must reflect those differences. The original study probed the (in)adequacy of schools; the Brad Trilogy illustrated patterns of description, analysis, and interpretation in qualitative research; *Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath* responded to the many entirely separate issues that arose from the events proceeding the original study. The original article was an academic report of ethnographic study. The trilogy explored matters of methodology. The book set the record straight on issues that continued to brew even years after the pertinent events; perhaps it even served to help WOLCOTT sort out his own feelings, which most certainly must be complex. In other words, it is a personal account that assumes a correspondingly informal stand, yet is ideal for the generation of deep scholarly dialogue. [58]



## 7. Conclusion

Ethics in qualitative research must extend beyond the limited scope of the studies themselves. It is not only the conduct of the researcher that must be scrutinized, but the conduct of those who choose to report on that researcher's work. In the case of ROTH's review of *Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath*, there is sufficient cause to view the analysis with scepticism. Simply put, WOLCOTT's actions in no way invalidate his original study's findings, nor can they be deemed inappropriate or unethical. [59]

The explorations in this article were spawned by a single study published over three decades ago. While the paper delves into only a portion of the potential topics that "Adequate Schools and Inadequate Schooling: The Life History of a Sneaky Kid" and *Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath* accommodate, it gives an indication of the power of qualitative research generally, and these texts specifically. [60]

No longer is the study of humans a stale and arid enterprise. Just as humans and human interactions have no limits to their facets and permutations, so is there no limit to the ways their behaviors can be encapsulated, represented, and interpreted. In this observation lies the strength of qualitative research in terms of its flexibility and its facility for inspiring debate, discussion, and discovery. [61]

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## Author

Kara STROBEL is a teacher/principal at a rural school in Alberta, Canada.

Contact:

Kara M. Strobel

Box 252

Consort AB T0C 1B0

Canada

E-mail: [kmstrobe@ucalgary.ca](mailto:kmstrobe@ucalgary.ca)

## Citation

Strobel, Kara M. (2005). After the Aftermath: A Reply to Wolff-Michael Roth's Review of Harry F. Wolcott's "Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath" [61 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(3), Art. 6, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs050364>.