
11-19-2012

The Relationship of Researcher and Participant in Qualitative Inquiry: From “Self and Other” Binaries to the Poststructural Feminist Perspective of Subjectivity

Kinga Varga-Dobai

Georgia Gwinnett College, kvargado@ggc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Varga-Dobai, K. (2012). The Relationship of Researcher and Participant in Qualitative Inquiry: From “Self and Other” Binaries to the Poststructural Feminist Perspective of Subjectivity. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(47), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2012.1705>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate
Indulge in Culture
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits
LEARN MORE

NSU
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

The Relationship of Researcher and Participant in Qualitative Inquiry: From “Self and Other” Binaries to the Poststructural Feminist Perspective of Subjectivity

Abstract

Whether approached from a positivist perspective or a more comprehensive postpositivist theoretical and philosophical grounding, the relationship between researcher and participant entails the strong binary opposition of the I-Thou (Buber, 1971) or Self and Other (Bhabha, 2004) within which I or Self is associated with the researcher and Thou or Other represents the research subject. The goal of this paper is to offer an overview of the various theoretical and methodological approaches to the researcher-participant relationship in qualitative research. The author will first explore how traditional qualitative and emancipatory feminist research have addressed this issue, then she will investigate how poststructural feminists such as Butler (1992), Lather (1991), Pillow (2003), St. Pierre (2000), and Spivak (1993), as well as Wisweswaran (1994), mainly through the use of the notion of subjectivity and voice, stepped into the debate and explored the researcher-participant relationship from a poststructuralist perspective.

Keywords

Other, Representation, Emancipatory Feminist Research, Poststructural Feminism, Subjectivity

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).



The Relationship of Researcher and Participant in Qualitative Inquiry: From “Self and Other” Binaries to the Poststructural Feminist Perspective of Subjectivity

Kinga Varga-Dobai

Georgia Gwinnett College, Lawrenceville, Georgia, USA

Whether approached from a positivist perspective or a more comprehensive postpositivist theoretical and philosophical grounding, the relationship between researcher and participant entails the strong binary opposition of the I-Thou (Buber, 1971) or Self and Other (Bhabha, 2004) within which I or Self is associated with the researcher and Thou or Other represents the research subject. The goal of this paper is to offer an overview of the various theoretical and methodological approaches to the researcher-participant relationship in qualitative research. The author will first explore how traditional qualitative and emancipatory feminist research have addressed this issue, then she will investigate how poststructural feminists such as Butler (1992), Lather (1991), Pillow (2003), St. Pierre (2000), and Spivak (1993), as well as Wisweswaran (1994), mainly through the use of the notion of subjectivity and voice, stepped into the debate and explored the researcher-participant relationship from a poststructuralist perspective. Keywords: Other, Representation, Emancipatory Feminist Research, Poststructural Feminism, Subjectivity

In *Local Knowledge*, his critique of anthropological understanding, Clifford Geertz (2000) described the Western conception of the I/Self as “bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organized into a distinctive whole” (p. 59). As Geertz (1973) had already pointed out, however, in his earlier work, *The Interpretation of Culture*, understanding the experience of Others within the framework of such conception is impossible. The reality of the Other lies on different grounds, and there is no distinctive whole to that reality, no bottom or origin, only layers on top of other layers. Geertz exemplified this disconnect between the I and the Other through the intriguing conversation of the Indian storyteller and the Englishmen (ethnographer):

An Englishman who, having been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested, in turn, on the back of a turtle, asked...what did the turtle rest on? Another turtle. And that turtle? ‘Ah, Sahib, after that is turtles all the way down. (pp. 28-29)

Thus, as Spivak (1976) concluded in her preface to Derrida’s (1974) *Of Grammatology*, when attempting to capture the Other, what we will be left with is “an always already absent present, of the lack of the origin” (p. xvii). In the *Location of Culture*, Bhabha (2004), coming from a similar poststructuralist perspective, stated that it

is this lack that renders the representation of the Other ambivalent. The Other, this docile subject of our research project, is there with us, talking and confessing, but according to Bhabha, her performance is that of a doubling, a game of the in between: being there and being invisible; almost the same, but not quite. Despite her words and observed actions we can never find out who she really is or what she does or means; she remains invisible and unknowable. Bhabha called this aspect of invisibility the “evil eye” (p. 75), a disembodied part of the objectified subject that unsettles the surveillant eye of the Master (self, researcher).

The analysis of the relationship between researcher and participant, this long-ruminated topic in the field of qualitative inquiry, is perhaps not one I could easily tame with a description. Nor do I intend to offer answers on how to best capture the *true voices* of our research subjects in qualitative research. The questions that I will raise are concerned with the issues of representation and the troubling “dimension of depth” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 69) that serves as the measure of validity upon which research rests. Following in the poststructuralist wake introduced by Bhabha, my goal with this paper is to interrogate how questions of identity are addressed in qualitative research and to explore how poststructural feminists such as Butler (1992), Lather (1991), Pillow (2003), St.Pierre (2000), Spivak (1993), and Wisweswaran (1994), mainly through the use of the notion of subjectivity and voice, stepped into the debate concerning the researcher-research subject relationship and explored the issue both from a theoretical and a methodological point of view. The value of this overview is to open up a reflective space where researchers can raise questions about their own approaches and challenges to represent their subjects and, perhaps, re-evaluate and enhance their research practices in light of the poststructural analysis of representation. To proceed, I will first address this nomad concept from the perspectives deployed by traditional qualitative research.

Researcher and the Participant from a Traditional Qualitative Perspective

Traditional approaches in qualitative inquiry are based on positivist perceptions of the social world and its subjects. As Patton (2002) pointed out, a positivist approach makes the assumption that “there is a real world with verifiable patterns that can be observed and predicted” (p. 91). Secondly, a positivist approach also suggests that the subjects of the social world are conscious, stable, unified, and autonomous individuals whose experiences are the most authentic kinds of truths, and whom are able to reflect rationally on their own experiences and speak for themselves (Garrick, 1999; Lather, 2000; Williams cited in St. Pierre, 2008).

Furthermore, positivism also situates the researcher as an objective observer who “is purposeful and knows what she or he is doing” (Scheurich, 1995, p. 240), and who is able “to enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 341) in order to make sense out of her experiences and understand the ways in which she contributed meaning to their actions. Objectivity also implies that the researcher is able to distance herself from the subjects she observed in the process of research. The questions of the researcher have bounded and stable meanings and she can deliver them in a neutral way without influencing her participant. As Patton (2002) remarked, “The neutral investigator enters the research arena with no ax to grind, no theory to prove, and no predetermined results to support. Rather the investigator’s commitment is to understand the world as it unfolds,

be true to complexities and multiple perspectives as they emerge” (p. 51) from the participants’ confessions.

Thus, Trinh (1989) in *Woman, Native, Other* critiqued traditional social science research and compared ethnographers to “active hunters” (p. 56) who set out to elevate the cause of the Other to the level of science and in doing so they claim to learn to forget themselves and talk from a neutral position and an impersonal voice. The neutrality of scientific methods allows them to capture the fundamental nature of the research subjects and establish universal knowledge claims based on what was said or observed. Researchers also give painstaking attention to the participants’ words. The interview with the participants becomes transcribed data that is sorted, coded, and highlighted in green and yellow, and from this decontextualized assembly of words, finally the true meaning of the participants’ experience emerges. Trinh (1989) however, claimed that to capture the essence, reality or true meaning of the Other through his/her words, stories and myths is in fact impossible. Scheurich (1995) similarly believed that what really emerges as a result of such interactions as interviewing does not mirror reality; it only mirrors the researcher’s mind set, her social and institutional position, and her goals with the research project. Participants have to answer questions that are carefully crafted by the researcher who is in total control of their transcribed words and this “decontextualized interview text which is transformed through the coding process becomes that from which the conventional researcher constructs his or her story” (p. 241). These myths, which are recorded in language and which one believes to carry such truth about the participant, are, nonetheless, interpretations; a simulation of the real that no longer is real (Trinh, 1989; Baudrillard, 1988). Although Scheurich (1995) did not claim that the positivist interview text was pure fiction, he nevertheless believed that positivism underestimated the complexity of one-to-one human interaction, an issue that was discussed in detail by both emancipatory (Mies, 1983; Mishler, 1986; Stanley & Wise, 1983) and poststructural feminist (Lather 1991; St. Pierre, 2008; Weedon, 1997) researchers.

Researcher-Participant Relationship from an Emancipatory Feminist Perspective

Feminist empiricists (Clough, 2003; Lloyd, 2005; Longino, 1987; Nelson, 1990) have been particularly interested in dismantling the positivist perspectives of traditional research, which tended to render women and their accounts invisible. Challenging the invisibility of women was a starting point for feminist methodology according to Gorelick (1991), and it developed into three different levels of critique: philosophical, moral, and practical.

The philosophical level critiqued positivism in research. Feminist empiricists refuted that there was a fixed, unchanging social world out there that could be recorded and documented through neutral, value-free methods. Nelson (1990) claimed that such methods were still tools of the patriarchal, scientific establishment and according to her “changing science requires to change the practices of scientists” (pp. 6-7). Thus, according to Gorelick (1991), on a practical level feminists critiqued dominant methodologies that were seen to distort findings and research results. Gorelick claimed that this practical critique developed by feminist methodologists was a direct result of a moral critique that challenged androcentrism (dominated by masculine perspectives) and the objectification and exploitation of research subjects. Women, according to Harding

(1997), for the very reason of being systematically excluded from knowledge making were more likely to notice androcentric bias in research. While the approaches feminists took in eliminating androcentric bias were multifarious, according to Harding, one common thread in feminist research was that “it generated its problematic from the perspective of women’s experience” (p. 163) and brought about innovative implications for the relationship of the researcher and research subject. One of these implications was the de-objectification of the researcher as an invisible voice of authority. Instead, feminist empiricism as described by Harding proposed a view of the researcher “as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interest” (p. 165) whose social and institutional situatedness shapes the results of her analysis.

Emancipatory feminist researchers were also concerned with the treatment of participants during the research process. According to Mies (1983), in order to avoid exploitation and treating their female subjects as a mere target group for research, the produced knowledge should have an emancipatory value and should contribute to the eradication of women’s oppression as a final goal for both the women’s movement and feminist research. Mies believed that researchers should be engaged in such struggles, and the value-free research and indifference toward the research subject should be replaced with a *conscious partiality* that entails more than subjectivism or simple empathy. Conscious partiality according to Mies creates a dialectical distance between the researcher and participant and “it enables the correction of distortions of perception on both sides and widens the consciousness of both, the researcher and the ‘researched’” (p. 123). Through a partial identification, the research would become a process of *conscientization* (Freire, 1970) both for the researcher and the research subject. Moreover, instead of consciousness-raising, Mies (1983) proposed a problem-formulating method, which investigated the oppressive social relations instead of focusing solely on relationship problems. Unlike a positivist approach that focused on facts and statistical analysis, this process of conscientization would contribute to the understanding of women’s *true consciousness*.

The assumption, however, that research subjects suffering from “false consciousness,” the “imperfect comprehension of their own interests” (Gorelick, 1991, p. 466) could achieve true consciousness with the researcher’s help implied a power hierarchy between researcher and researched that became the target of further criticism both for feminist and progressive qualitative inquiry. As Gorelick (1991) claimed, the notion of false consciousness implied that there is a true consciousness and that the researcher knows it and the participant does not. According to Mishler (1986), this asymmetry of power entailed that while the researcher determined the adequacy and appropriateness of responses as well as defined the ‘meaning’ of these responses, the participant did not have the opportunity to comment on the interpretations of their own words. Mishler saw the solution to this dilemma in restructuring the interviewer-interviewee process and in empowering the respondents to speak in their own voices. Similarly, Kasper (as cited in Gorelic, 1991) stated, “the role of the researcher is to “give voice” to hitherto silenced groups and facilitate their own discoveries” (p. 462).

Giving voice became a dominant strand in emancipatory feminist inquiry, although some have argued that this “superordinate” (Scheurich, 1995, p. 246) position of the researchers that teaches others how to find their voice further reinforced the power asymmetry instead of doing away with it. Thus the troublesome notions of giving voice,

true consciousness, empowerment and representability were further deconstructed by poststructuralist feminists. Stanley and Wise (1983) go as far as claiming that false consciousness was a positivist notion in nature, and as such it further reinforced the researcher/participant binary. Feminists, who refused to be interpreted by men, should also “reject the idea that scientists, or feminists, can become experts in other people’s lives and ...the belief that there is one true reality to become experts about” (p. 194). The assumptions that personal experience, “what we feel and think in any particular situation” (Weedon, 1997, p. 81) was key to knowledge and truth, that the voice of the participant was “the carrier of the truest meaning” (St. Pierre, 2008, p. 320) and the researcher was “the (neutral) instrument of data collection” (Patton, 2002, p. 51) were still built on positivist assumptions of the subject and language. Garrick (1999) translated the above-mentioned assumptions as the emphasis on determinacy (that there is a certain truth that can be known), rationality (that objectivity is possible), and prediction (that the knowledge claims achieved through research is universal). He, nonetheless, claimed that this approach failed to adequately make sense of the social world and people’s lived experience. While personal experience was a starting point for empirical research, its authenticity and its role as the “true” source of knowledge should nonetheless be questioned because of its reliance on language.

Such positivist perspectives were, therefore, left behind by poststructural research that instead focused on the analysis of language and formative power of discourse. The three main shifts, according to Lather (1991), that poststructural works brought about in the human sciences are: (a) from general theorizing to the problems of interpretation and description; (b) a deconstruction of writing with focus on the textual staging of knowledge; and (c) an emphasis on the social relations of the research closely connected with the deconstruction of language and subject, two central concepts for poststructural feminist inquiry.

Poststructural Perspective on Language and the Subject

The deconstruction of the researcher-research subject relationship for poststructural feminism started with a deconstruction of such concepts as language, subjectivity, social organizations and power among others. However, neither deconstruction nor poststructural research uncovered the meaning of any of these concepts or phenomena. Poststructuralism did not include questions about what the subject, power or language was. Rather, the questions it raised were: “How does discourse (power, the subject) function? Where is to be found? How does it get produced and regulated? What are its social effects?” (Bové, 1995, p. 3). Poststructuralist perspectives claimed that it was discourse where “knowledge, truth, and subjects are produced” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 486).

Poststructuralists challenged the transparency of the description that social reality could adequately be depicted through language and that the voice of the humanist subject transmits an absolute, transcendental truth that can be captured. Derrida’s (1978) theory of difference challenged such transcendentalism by deconstructing the very concept of metaphysics that had dominated the Western thinking and philosophy since Plato and which MacLure (2003) called the “legacy of Enlightenment” (p. 179). Burr (1995) explained that according to this legacy, language functions as a *bag of labels* through

which we can describe our thoughts and feelings, and we can communicate these internal states to others. Language in this sense is a tool that is able to channel the true knowledge of the self. It has a correlation with the objects (referent) of the world out there and is able to capture and represent that outer reality to us through words (sign).

For Spivak (1976), this modernist perspective entailed the “nostalgia for presence” (p. xvi) and “an archaic and natural innocence, of purity of presence and self-presence in speech” (p. xix). In her critique of *Voice in Qualitative Inquiry*, St. Pierre (2008) similarly claimed that the adherence to presence; that is, the importance of the spoken, is at the base of face-to-face interactions in qualitative inquiry:

We believe that our face-to-face interactions with people make our work especially valid, we are present in our research, in the thick of things, talking with and observing our participants. Qualitative inquiry is not distant; it’s live and in person; it happens right now. And, of course, extended time in the field-being there and being there longer-makes our work even more valid. (p. 321)

As St. Pierre pointed out, for the poststructuralist, however, the voice and words of the participant could not ensure validity and truth. The meaning of a word changes depending on the context we use it in or on the person we are addressing it to; what a question or an answer means to a researcher can easily mean something different to an interviewee. Language is a place where identities are built, maintained or challenged; it is a space for transformation. What it means to be “a woman,” to be “a child,” or to be “black” could be transformed and reconstructed, and for poststructuralism language is the key to such transformation.

Structural linguist Saussure (2006) was in fact the first one who refuted that language functions as a set of tools that we can use to express our thoughts. He challenged the perspective that there is a direct relationship between the language, the mind and the outside world. The idea that words do not derive from nature or reality, but rather created by the structure of the language, represents the basic tenet of his structural linguistics. Even though in many modern languages there is a correspondence between the word apple and the outside reality of the fruit, in ancient Greek, for example, the word apple denotes not only the round red-yellow or green fruit but also round fruits in general. In this case, thus, there is no direct correspondence between the word and the outside reality. Furthermore, Saussure divided the sign into signifier (sound-image) and signified (mental-image) and claimed that the sound image of apple would not evoke the same mental-image in all of us: some might think of apple as red and small, others might think of it as yellow or green. There is no direct correspondence between the sign (here, the apple) and the referent (the object to which it refers to). Their relationship is instead arbitrary and meaning is created “by the system of language through a process of opposition and assimilation to other terms” (Csapo, 2005, p. 187). In Saussure’s (2006) words, the characteristic of a word is not defined by what it is but by what the others are not. Good is defined by what bad is not, beautiful is defined by what ugly is not and so on. On the other hand, although Saussure accepted that the sign obtained meaning because of its opposition to other signs, he did not recognize that the same signifier might have different meanings (St. Pierre, 2000). He instead maintained that when the signifier

(spoken sound) became attached to the signified (concept), their relationship became fixed. "...once words become attached to particular meaning they are 'fixed' in that relationship, so that the same word has always the same meaning" (Burr, 1995, p. 38).

Nevertheless, if language was not a transparent "expressive medium" (Jackson, 2003, p. 701) of an essence that existed out there waiting to be discovered and voiced, or interpreted, but rather a medium that created the meaning and truth or the subject, then consequently the subject whom as well, according to poststructuralism, was created in language, would not have a unified nature or stable presence. In order to deconstruct the unitary female subject, poststructural feminism has applied a "persistent critique" (Spivak, 1996, p. 28) that was not a denial of the subject, but an acknowledgment of both the dangerousness and usefulness of the term.

One might argue, as Lather (1991) did, that this deconstruction was born out of the uprising of the marginalized. And indeed, *A Black Feminist Statement*, written by a collective of Black feminists in 1977 was one of the earliest documents that addressed the problem of interpretations and the exclusion of Black female experience. The authors of this statement argued that White women made little effort to combat their own discriminatory attitudes against Black women and that their knowledge of the experience, culture, or history of Black culture was superficial. Consequently, it became a major concern for the political agenda of Black feminists to address this issue of racism that was apparent within the White feminist movement.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) further explored the issue of inequality and discrimination between Black and White women in academia. She claimed that even though the feminist movement itself meant to deconstruct hierarchical gender settings, in the early years it simply excluded the Black female experience and preserved the racial hierarchy by valuing the critical work of White women or even White men over the theories developed by Black women or women of color. Black experience meant only the experience of Black men, while Black women as the Other were talked about and talked for by White women.

Alarcon (1997) from the point of view of third world feminism concurred that the "autonomous, self-making, self-determining subject" (p. 289) of dominant feminist discourse, by focusing on the exploration of common differences of all women, neglected to reveal the multiplicity of positions and subjectivity of women from various racial, cultural, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Alarcon (1997) claimed that the works included in the collection of Chicana writers *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color* attempted to give voice to the experiences of the third world woman outlining the existing differences between their lives and the lives of Anglo-American women. Although *Bridge* had an important impact on Anglo-American feminism and it contributed to the appearance of alternative feminist discourses, Alarcon argued that its White feminist readers tended to neglect the exploration of the this issue of difference between women and instead focused on the inclusion of Latino women in an "oppositional discourse with some white men" (p. 291) and viewed them under the common denominator of women. Alarcon claimed however that the exploration of commonalities or "common differences" (p. 291) between the experiences of women could not happen unless their divisions are first explored.

Women's voice in feminist research had usually drawn on Western, White, middle-class perceptions of femininity, acting as a practice that either excluded or

appropriated the differences and the point of view of minority voices (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Alarcon, 1997; Spivak, 1994). In this sense feminist research continued the exclusionary practice of the White western male discourse that had dominated research and theory for centuries. Spivak (1994), in this debate over the possibilities and challenges of representation, asserted that researchers should not attempt to retrieve voices that are silenced because such voices are irretrievable and because “such a move would subscribe once more to the humanist notion of the voice as the free expression of an ‘authentic’ individuality” (Spivak as cited in Childs and Williams, 1997, p. 163).

Poststructuralism distances itself from this authentic individuality and rather focuses on subjectivity, “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to her world” (Weedon, 1997, p. 32), a notion that is often contradictory and reconstituted in discourse. Poststructural feminists such as Judith Butler (1992) also advocated the point of view of changing subject positions. She suggested that we look at how the subject is created in order to trace the discursive constructions within which the subject is categorized, and to deconstruct the foundations of these categories. In other words, Butler warned us to question the very concepts that we are working with and their mode of production in order to avoid returning to exclusionary identity categories that ultimately confined the subject to another mode of being, to another essence.

Butler (1992) believed that to deconstruct the subject or other categories did not mean that we needed to throw away the old concepts. Rather as Spivak (1976) interpreting Derrida’s deconstruction explained, we should look at them “under erasure” (p. xv)--that is, to write down a word and cross it out--in order to liberate it from its old content. Lather (2007) explained the concept of under erasure as the “troubling and using the concepts we think we cannot think without...keeping something visible but crossed out in order to avoid universalizing and monumentalizing, keeping it as both limit and resource” (pp. 167-168). Instead of throwing away the concepts, we should reuse them for new purposes, as Butler (1992) suggested; to continue to use them and to repeat them subversively. It is this call for deconstruction and subversive repetition that gradually has shifted the attention of some researchers from the concept of subject to that of subjectivity.

Researcher-Participant Relationship in Light of Subjectivity

While one of the goals of feminism was to provide less oppressive ways of knowing, this goal was not always accomplished by feminist researchers. Lather (1991) in *Deconstructing/Deconstructive Inquiry* claimed that the liberatory intention to speak for the others was in fact a continuance of dominance over the research subject. Sommer (1994) believed that such dominance is a result of the desire for knowledge about the Other that is also a desire for power, a kind of violence that is an “apropriation in the guise of an embrace” (p. 543). In order to do unexploitive research, Lather (1991) argued that researchers should reflect on their own subjectivity and should write themselves back into research. Writing themselves back into research nevertheless does not mean putting themselves in the center of the research as the “‘master of truth and justice’ whose self-appointed task is to uphold reason and reveal the truth to those who are unable to see or speak it” (Foucault as cited in Lather, 1991, p. 157). Rather they

should focus on the text itself, on the structuring and shaping mechanisms implemented in research that was usually rendered invisible in traditional social science research.

Butler (1993) called this structuring and shaping mechanism of language performative: “that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (p. 13). Language does not reflect but rather produces the subject, the truth, and the meaning it seeks to name in research. Researchers therefore should attend to the process of interpretations, to the process of the construction of findings, and to how they come to know what they claim to know. Attention to the issues of interpretation brings about attention to the researchers’ own implications and subjectivity, which Pillow (2003) described as “a focus on how does who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel affect data collection and analysis” (p. 176). Moreover, attention to the issues of interpretation also attends to the inconsistencies of the stories researchers hear, what Lather (2007) described as “the tales not told, the words not written and transcribed, the words thought but not uttered, the unconscious: all that gets lost in the telling and the representing” (p. 13). Lather argued that the implementation of self-reflexivity would help researchers in this evaluative task.

Fonow and Cook (2005) defined this reflexivity as “the tendency of feminists to reflect on, examine critically, and explore analytically that nature of the research process” (p. 2218). According to Pillow (2003) reflexivity is used “as a methodological tool to better represent, legitimize, or call into question data” (p. 176). Pillow similarly claimed that the focus on reflexivity in critical, feminist theory was used to challenge the author’s authority and dominance in the research. Researchers started paying attention to developing reciprocity with their research subjects, in order to do research with them in a way that does not exploit them, but rather has positive effects on their lives. Nonetheless, as Pillow pointed out, such emphasis on reflexivity and on producing a better knowledge of yourself and your situatedness in the research project in order to develop better abilities to capture the essence of the participant was “a continued reliance upon traditional notions of validity, truth and essence” (p. 180).

Pillow (2003), from a poststructuralist point of view, therefore, suggested a reflexivity of discomfort that rendered the knowing of the self and the research subjects uncontainable and tenuous. Denzin (1997) called this kind of reflexive research “messy texts” (p. 225) that make the researcher a part of the writing project, but which, however, are not just subjective accounts of experience. According to Denzin, such research “attempts to reflexively map the multiple discourses that occur in a given social space...and are always multivoiced. No interpretation is privileged... messy texts move back and forth between description, interpretation and voice... and erase the dividing line between observer and observed” (p. 225). This type of writing was a framing of reality, an open-ended project that refused simplistic dichotomies and differences and did not impose meaning on the research subject and the reader. What poststructural feminist research ultimately set out to do was not to answer the question of what the difference was between researcher and participant, but rather how difference might be constructed or deconstructed through writing. What follows is several short reviews of the works of three researchers to exemplify how through the reflexivity of discomfort, researchers could use the possibilities of multiple voiced writing to reflect on the issues of subjectivity and to scrutinize the deployment of knowledge and power in research.

Reflexivity of Discomfort in Feminist Research

Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) in *Growing Up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class* investigated the production and regulation of working class and middle class subjectivity in the social and cultural. How do identities get produced and how do they shift over time? What are the ways in which social inequality and oppression is becoming disguised and understood as personal failure? How do people reinvent themselves in light of changing social situatedness? What are the psychological effects of the process of self-invention? Walkerdine along with her co-researchers claimed that in order to explore the nature of subjectivity, they moved beyond both the social and psychological determinism and from a poststructuralist perspective they looked at the experience of their subjects “as complex, usually contradictory mixture of unconscious and conscious rationalities within various available positions in a multiplicity of discourses” (p. 99).

The researchers in Walkerdine’s (2001) study applied a three-level analysis within which they interpreted data in different ways. First, they focused on the narrative, plots, sub-plots and metaphors. Second, they looked at the contradictions in the accounts provided by a person or family. Third, they examined the role of the researcher, her relationship with the research subject and her conscious and unconscious involvement in the knowledge production. Walkerdine et al.’s study showed that after several interviews with one of the team members, the researcher identified death as one of the topics the participant did not want to discuss. Looking at the issue closely, however, revealed that it was in fact the researcher who, albeit unconsciously, avoided the topic of death. According to Walkerdine and colleagues, the researcher, in order to cope with her anxiety over being pregnant and having a father who was dying of cancer at the same time, eschewed the topic of death during conversations, but interpreted it as the participant’s choice of avoidance. Poststructural theory, however, helped them reflect on these crucial aspects of data production that otherwise would have been ignored.

Margery Wolf (1992) in *A Thrice Told Tale* similarly reflected on how various forms of written records, through which she deployed the story of a woman from a small Chinese village in the early 1960, provided different versions of one event. The riddle was whether the woman in question, who was a wife and a mother of three, and whom over a period of one month displayed strange and destructive behavior, was suffering of mental illness or rather was possessed by god. Wolf’s first account is a short story about the events written by her and it relies only on her own memories and perceptions. The second text is unanalyzed field notes and observation collected by staff members, reproduced almost exactly as they were recorded in 1960 by the researcher’s assistant and translator. The third text is another retelling of the story in an academic style accompanied by an interpretation of why things happened the way they happened.

While contemplating on why in the end the majority of villagers believed that the woman was mentally ill and not a shaman, Wolf (1992) looked at the available social and cultural discourses that placed the woman in a certain position within the Chinese society. Such analyses were offered in form of a commentary after each chapter in which the author also illustrated and argued with the problems brought to the fore by the notion of reflexivity. Although Wolf did not consider her book poststructural, the approach she took in deploying the story from different perspectives is very useful for poststructural

research. One of the most important aspects in the book--her discussion of the power negotiation between researcher and participants--unquestionably deploys a Foucauldian understanding of the notion of power. Foucault's (1990) understanding of power was fundamentally different from the essentialist views of power set forth by Marx. Power is not something that one person has and another does not; it is not somebody's property. For Foucault, power constituted the name "of a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (p. 93), a multiplicity of force relations deployed in social organizations. Power is not negative and it does not mask, conceal or exclude; rather, it is negotiated and produced in discourse and it further "produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (Foucault, 1995, p. 194). Applying this notion of power to the relationship between researcher and participant, Wolf (1992) deconstructed traditional perspectives that usually placed the researcher in the position of authority and left the participant powerless. Although the White female or male researcher coming from the first world was certainly the representative of authority, according to Wolf, his/her power did not necessarily produce the research subject as powerless. The researcher cannot order their own participants to reveal details about their lives that they did not want to reveal, and research participants are aware that the success of the research project was very much dependent on their contribution. Thus on one hand researchers were constantly being exposed to their participants' (un-) willingness to contribute. On the other hand they were also faced with the dilemma of how to handle misinformation or even the silence of the participant.

In her discussion of fieldnotes and observation, Wolf (1992) also reminded us that even though "raw data" is at the basis of research, it cannot be perceived as an accurate account, and this information is as well a product of the power relations embedded between researcher and participant. Fieldnotes, as Wolf claimed, "cannot be a pure description of reality, no matter who collects them or writes them down" (p. 91). Her own fieldnotes were recorded by a translator, who more directly than indirectly chose to retain some of the information she received from or about the natives, and did not capture a "truth" about the Chinese villagers. Although not all participants are subject to translation, their words are "screened" by somebody else's perspective and interpretation.

The power/knowledge aspects of feminist research, the issues of methodology, representation, and researcher-research subject relationship was further problematized by Wisweswaran (1994) in *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. Drawing on Stacey's (1988) concept of betrayal, that is, the violation of the participant's trust by the researcher as a result of the inherent relations of power embedded in research, Wisweswaran (1994) "stages multiple allegories of betrayal" (p. 76). Betrayal, as the recognition that "cultural interpretation is power-laden" (p. 76), locks these problems together according to Wisweswaran. Similar to Wolf (1992), Wisweswaran (1994) traced the discursive formation of power in the researcher-research subject relationship. The goal of the researcher to interview, observe, and analyze her research subjects became impossible as a result of the betrayal of her participants who chose to remain silent, not to share everything, or to lie. Wisweswaran argued that to remain silent or not to reveal the complete truth is a symptom of inequality and power differences between women. Nevertheless, these conflicting power relations embedded in ethnographic research and the refusal of the participant to speak or the refusal of the ethnographer to reveal everything she has heard, observed, and noticed to her audience "unfolds into a peculiar

form of knowing, in which the confounding yet tactical junction of disclosure and exposure is dramatized” (p. 50). According to Wisweswaran, such disclosures and exposures in research are not only strategies to disrupt the Western feminist project of subject retrieval but also represent accountability to research subjects. Instead of representing the subject, researchers must learn to represent themselves by emphasizing that the knowledge they deploy in research is not transparent and/or innocent, but rather situated. By listening to the silence of the participant and learning from what it is not said, an ethnography of betrayal does not only question its own authority, but recognizes the impossibility of authority overall. It is this “negotiation of impossibility” (p. 79) that, according to Wisweswaran, a deconstructive research adopts as method.

Conclusion

In my own classroom research with pre-service teachers on reader response to gender representations in realistic and historical fiction young adult books, the familiarity with these various interpretations served several purposes. Attention to the dilemmas posed by the issue of subjectivity, representation and reflexivity helped me understand that the Sherlock Holmesian trick “to dispel magic and mystery, to make everything explicit, accountable, subject to scientific analysis” (Belsey, 1985, p. 669) is impossible. My poststructural orientation helped me question how I viewed my participants as research subjects involved in our work. The idea of a stable self that is able to provide coherent and well-defined answers to questions was challenged when I started to pay more attention to the inconsistencies of the words I heard. When I asked those young women to respond to their independent readings and comment on the representation of women from non-Western countries in young adult literature, and the ways in which these books reinforced or challenged gender-related stereotypes, the awareness of the complex aspect of subjectivity helped me recognize the contradictory ways in which my students struggled with interpretation and meaning. Similar to other research on this topic, in my own analysis I noticed that some students reinforced those stereotypes and generalizations in their responses, for example, the stereotype of the victimized third world woman. They also positioned themselves as being more privileged in relation to those women. At the same time, the contradictory voices of those students’ interpretations were apparent as well. My students deconstructed the notion of stereotyping by reflecting on the ways in which similar gender-related discourses functioned in the lives of Western women. For example, two of my students wrote parallel poems about the traditions of the fattening hut practiced in some African countries as described in *The Fattening Hut*, (Collins, 2005), and the eating disorders of anorexia and bulimia common among young women in well-developed Western countries.

The poststructural concept of subjectivity also helped me recognize the relevance of my students’ lived experience not only as readers but also as women and prompted me to deconstruct my own assumptions about their cultural and racial background—two important factors in formulating their responses to readings. Because my students were mostly White, I first assumed that they all came from middle-class families and enjoyed the advantages of that economic and social positioning. Second, I assumed that because of their privileged background they would have a difficult time connecting with the

experiences of women from developing countries as described in the novels. In order to question my own assumptions, I started expanding my research questions, and instead of plainly focusing on the issue of gender representation in the discussed books, I also asked my students to make personal connections with the stories. When I listened to some of their words, I realized, that, in fact, several of my students were first-generation college students who worked several jobs to support themselves. Some of them were teenage mothers, some of them reflected on how they were bullied in high school because they did not have trendy, expensive clothes, or how they were ridiculed because they had strong Southern accents. Thus, beyond textual analysis, attention to the subjectivity of the reader (my students) helped me learn about my own students and helped them connect their own lived experience as women through reading. These personal reactions and comments did not usually occur during the one-on-one discussions that I personally had with them about the young adult books. Rather, these conversations happened on occasions that I did not originally consider a source of data collection: the small-group discussions with colleagues and friends. Even though in those situations I was a part of the group, I was not the person to whom they had to directly respond. Thus, the concept of subjectivity also helped me become more aware of how the structured nature of interviewing, and my own presence and role as a researcher and authority figure, affected my students' responses. With their direct responses to me, I often sensed that they wanted to please me with their answers, or they learned how to respond well to literature-related questions. Informal discussions with their friends and colleagues on the same topics allowed for a more open and flowing conversation to take place in which the participants were able to respond to literature and also co-construct the meaning of those texts in conversation, talk about their own lives, and deconstruct their own subject positions as first-world women.

Additionally, I viewed my own memoing and journaling not only as an analytical strategy to explore data but also as a form of data itself. This approach helped me reflect both on my own subjectivity as a researcher and the messiness of the analysis process. By treating my memos as a primary source of analysis, I wrote myself back into research and showed my own struggles in trying to make sense of my extensive data. The memos revealed the ideas that I abandoned or re-thought the confused moments, or those activities, such as watching a movie, that had no direct connection with my research but sparked an idea that moved my thinking forward while analyzing my students' responses.

Lather (2007) described the approach to research that emphasizes the self-awareness of the researcher in the construction of knowledge and pays attention to inconsistencies and dilemmas of the process as a form of "post-methodology" (p. 70). For post-methodology, dilemmas are not obstacles; instead, they become sources of reflection to eschew transparency in research. Post-methodology also attends to how power is taken up and negotiated by the researcher and her participants in research and sheds light on not what knowledge is but rather how knowledge is created. Post-methodology also re-evaluates what we consider valid knowledge and recognizes the relevance of details that come to us through interactions that we cannot foresee. Post-methodology would allow its researchers to move in an unpredictable fashion in order to create a new nomad science that is innovative, pays attention to multiple perspectives, and exists in its own metamorphoses, currents, and flows.

To describe and report the findings of a qualitative research project was not the goal of this paper. For future projects, however, it was important to do the “headwork” and provide an overview of the various theoretical and methodological interpretations concerning the researcher-participant relationship in feminist qualitative inquiry. To that end, in this paper, I explored how positivist, emancipatory, and poststructural feminist research have addressed this issue. Additionally, I paid particular attention to the innovative perspectives the notion of subjectivity brought into qualitative analysis including my own classroom research with pre-service teachers. While a reflective overview is not an end on its own, it is part of the analytic work that enables qualitative researchers to improve their own inquiry.

References

- Abu-Lughod, L. (1990). Can there be a feminist ethnography? *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 5(1), 7-27.
- Alarcon, N. (1997). The theoretical subject(s) of this bridge called my back and Anglo-American feminism. In L. Nicholson (Ed.), *The second wave: A reader in feminist theory* (pp. 288-299). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. (2004). *The location of culture* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge
- Baudrillard, J. (1988). Simulacra and simulations. In M. Poster (Ed.), *Jean Baudrillard selected writings* (2nd ed., P. Foss, P. Patton, & P. Beichtman, Trans., pp. 166-184). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bové, P. (1995). Discourse. In F. Lentricchia & T. Maclaughlin (Eds.), *Critical terms for literary study* (2nd ed., pp. 50-65) Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Belsey, C. (1985). Constructing the subject: Deconstructing the text. In R. Warhol & D. P. Herndl (Eds.), *Feminism: An anthology of literary theory and criticism* (pp. 657-673). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Buber, M. (1971). *I and thou* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). New York, NY: Touchstone.
- Burr, V. (1995). *An introduction to social constructionism*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1992). Contingent foundations: Feminism and the question of “postmodernism.” In J. Butler & J. W. Scott (Eds.), *Feminists theorize the political* (pp. 3-21). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter. On the discursive limits of sex*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Childs, P., & Williams, P. R. J. (1997). *An introduction to post-colonial theory*. London, UK: Prentice Hall.
- Clough, S. (2003). *Beyond epistemology: A pragmatist approach to feminist science studies*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Collins, P. L. (2005). *The fattening hut*. Boston, MA: Graphia.
- Csapo, E. (2005). *Theories of mythology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Denzin, N. K. (1997). *Interpretive ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Derrida, J. (1974). *Of grammatology*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Derrida, J. (1978). Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences. In J. Derrida, *Writing and difference* (A. Bass, Trans., pp. 278-294). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fonow, M. M., & Cook, J. A. (2005). Feminist methodology: New applications in the academy and public policy. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30(4), 2211-2236.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality: An introduction, volume 1* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York, NY: Seabury.
- Garrick, J. (1999). Doubting the philosophical assumptions of interpretive research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 12(2), 147-156.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Geertz, C. (2000). *Local knowledge* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Gorelick, S. (1991). Contradictions of feminist methodology. *Gender and Society*, 5(4), 459-477.
- Harding, S. (1997). Is there a feminist method? In S. Kemp & J. Squires (Eds.), *Feminism* (pp. 160-170). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jackson, A. Y. (2003). Rhizovocality. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(5), 693-710.
- Lather, P. (1991). Deconstructing/deconstructive inquiry: The politics of knowing and being known. *Educational Theory*, 41(2), 153-170.
- Lather, P. (2000). Against empathy, voice and authenticity. *Women, Gender, and Research*, 4, 16-25.
- Lather, P. (2007). *Getting lost: Feminist efforts toward a double(d) science*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Lloyd, E. A. (2005). *The case of the female orgasm: Bias in the science of evolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Longino, H. E. (1987). Can there be a feminist science? *Hypatia*, 2(3), 51-64.
- MacLure, M. (2003). *Discourse in educational and social research*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Mies, M. (1983). Towards a methodology for feminist research. In G. Bowles & R. D. Klein (Eds.), *Theories of women studies* (pp. 117-207). Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mishler, E. G. (1986). *Research interviewing: Context and narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nelson, L. H. (1990). *Who knows: From Quine to a feminist empiricism*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pillow, W. S. (2003). Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(2), 175-196.

- Saussure, F. (2006). *Writings in general linguistics*. (S. Bouquet & R. Engler, Eds.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Scheurich, J. J. (1995). A postmodern critique of research interviewing. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(3), 239-252.
- Sommer, D. (1994). Resistant texts and incompetent readers. *Poetics Today*, 15(4), 523-551.
- Spivak, G. C. (1976). Translator's preface. In J. Derrida (Ed.), *Of grammatology* (G. C. Spivak, Trans., pp. ix-x). Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1993). *Outside in the teaching machine*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Spivak, G. C. (1994). Can the subaltern speak? In P. Williams & L. Chrisman (Eds.), *Colonial discourse and postcolonial theory: A reader* (pp. 66-111). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1996). Bonding in difference. Interview with Alfred Arteaga. In D. Landry & G. MacLean (Eds.), *The Spivak reader* (pp. 15-28). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Stacey, J. (1988). Can there be a feminist ethnography? *Women Studies International Forum*, 11(1), 21-27.
- Stanley, R., & Wise, S. (1983). 'Back into the personal'or: Our attempt to construct 'feminist research'. In G. Bowles & R. D. Klein (Eds.), *Theories of women studies* (pp. 192-209). Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2000). Poststructural feminism in education: An overview. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(5), 477-515.
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2008). Decentering voice in qualitative inquiry. In A. Y. Jackson & L. Mazzei (Eds.), *Voice in qualitative inquiry: Challenging conventional, interpretive, and critical conceptions* (pp. 319-336). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Trinh, M. T. (1989). *Woman, native, other*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Walkerdine, V., Lucey, H., & Melody, J. (2001). *Growing up girl: Psychosocial explorations of gender and class*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Weedon, C. (1997). *Feminist practice and poststructural theory* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell. (Original work published in 1987)
- Wisweswaran, K. (1994). *Fictions of feminist ethnography*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wolf, M. (1992). *A thrice told tale: Feminism, postmodernism & ethnographic responsibility*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Author Note

Kinga Varga-Dobai is an assistant professor of Literacy Education at Georgia Gwinnett College. Her research interests include poststructural feminist qualitative research methodologies, intercultural learning, immigration and English Language Learners, and multicultural and feminist approaches to children's literature. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to: Kinga Varga-Dobai, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Literacy Education, School of Education, Building A, Suite 1160, Georgia Gwinnett College, 1000 University Center Lane, Lawrenceville, GA 30043; E-mail: kvargado@ggc.edu; Phone: 678-392-8005.

Copyright 2012: Kinga Varga-Dobai and Nova Southeastern University

Article Citation

Varga-Dobai, K. (2012). The relationship of researcher and participant in qualitative inquiry: From “self and other” binaries to the poststructural feminist perspective of subjectivity.. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(Art. 93), 1-17. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/varga-dobai.pdf>
